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# MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

DECEMBER, 1965 Vol. 18, No. 1

**NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET**

## ACCENT ON MURDER

by BRETT HALLIDAY

*The Major was a proud, reckless man, and his bully boys ruled Mescala with iron hands. But, Shayne wondered—was he mad enough to stoop to murder to save his dead wife's name?*

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A New MIKE SHAYNE Adventure

# ACCENT ON MURDER

*The Major was an impulsive man, and the woman he'd married was almost as young as his daughter. But could that alone, Shayne wondered, spin so fatal a web of violence?*

**by BRETT HALLIDAY**

MIKE SHAYNE listened carefully to the voice. Lucy Hamilton listened on the extension in Shayne's private office. The voice was low, muffled, but unmistakably threatening. "Stay out of Mescala, Shayne."

Twice the muffled voice repeated the same warning, and then was gone. Shayne raised a shaggy red eyebrow toward his pert secretary. Lucy stared back mystified at her big-framed employer. Her voice was even more mystified as she spoke, the extension phone still in her hand.

"Mescala, a small town on the edge of the Everglades about fifty miles from Miami," Lucy recited slowly, recalling her wide knowledge of Florida. "County seat of Pachoba County and about the only town in the county. You've never been near the place, Michael. At least, not to my knowledge."

Shayne laughed. "And what you don't know about me doesn't

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exist, Angel. No, I've never been near Mescala or Pachoba County. But I have an idea I'm going to be invited very soon."

"Invited?" Lucy said, her pretty face puzzled beneath her long dark hair.

Shayne slowly hung up the telephone. He sat behind his desk in the morning sun of his Flagler Street office, and frowningly returned Lucy's stare.

"That was a local call, Angel. Whoever our anonymous friend is, he called from Miami—not Mescala. I'd say he jumped the gun with his warning. Someone is coming to invite me to Mescala, and our friend simply called too soon. My guess would be not very much too soon."

As if to prove Shayne psychic as well as a prophet, the sound of the outer door opening and closing was clear in the inner private office. Shayne grinned, and Lucy pretended to be properly impressed.

"Michael the Mystic," Lucy said.

"Elementary, my dear Lucy," Shayne said. "Where there's a warning there must be a case. Go and show the party in, Angel, and not a word about our muffled-voiced caller."

"All right, Michael," Lucy said.

She walked out into the outer office wearing her most efficient smile of welcome. Behind his desk, Shayne waited to see who his visitor would be. He had no doubt that the visit itself would be tied in with the Mescala phone call. The only question he had was what had delayed his caller? He watched as Lucy ushered the caller into his private office.

"Michael, this is Miss Wendy Christophe," she said. "She's come all the way from Mescala."

The girl was small and pretty. Blonde, about five-foot-two, a hundred and seven or eight pounds. Well-curved, full and a woman, but in actuality still a girl. Maybe nineteen or less. Her clothes were good, stylish and obviously expensive.

"From Mescala?" Shayne said. "Now that is interesting. Sit down Miss Christophe."

The pretty young girl sat. Her white-gloved hands twisted nervously in her lap. Shayne nodded to Lucy, and his brown-eyed secretary left discreetly.

Shayne leaned toward the girl. "Now, Miss Christophe, what can I do for you?" the detective said.

"It's my mother," the girl blurted out. "You can find out who killed her! I know—"

Shayne narrowed his bushy eyebrows. "Your mother? I'm sorry."

"They say it was an accident, but it wasn't!"

"Who says it was an accident?" Shayne asked slowly.

"Everyone! Father, the Sheriff, my Uncle Joe, even Morse."

"If the Sheriff thinks it was an accident—" Shayne began.

"He's a liar!" the girl snapped furiously.

Shayne began to tug on his left earlobe. Normally, if the police and everyone else agreed that a death was an accident, the likelihood of its being one rated high. But Shayne was thinking of his mysterious, muffled-voiced caller. Why warn him away from a simple accident?

"Maybe you better tell me the whole story from the beginning," Shayne said.

The pretty young girl took a deep breath and nodded. She was trembling all over with a kind of nervous rage. And yet there was a cold, steady look to her blue eyes. Shayne decided that Miss Wendy Christophe was not the flighty type at all.

"Well, there isn't much to tell, Mr. Shayne," the girl said. "Mother's plane crashed and she was killed. She was so young and alive, Mr. Shayne. She loved to fly. Daddy bought her the Beechcraft only last year."

"I'm sorry," Shayne said again.

"She was only thirty, Mr. Shayne," Wendy Christophe went on quickly. "She wasn't my real mother. She was my step-mother. But I loved her. She was the best thing that ever happened to me, the best thing that ever came to that dead town!"

"Thirty?" Shayne said, making no effort to conceal his surprise.

The girl nodded. "And Father is sixty-two. All right, Mr. Shayne. Celia was too young and father too old. Perhaps there were other men, but what right did father have to complain? She was a good wife to him."

Shayne rubbed the stubble on his gaunt jaw. "Were there other men?"

"Perhaps," Wendy Christophe said. "I'm not sure. Mescala is a dull place, Mr. Shayne."

"And you think that your father might have—?"

The girl looked him straight in the eye. Her blue eyes did not flinch. "Father owns the county. He has never been ungenerous in money matters, and he gave us everything we asked for. But that does not give him the right to commit murder! Oh, I'm not accusing him. I'm sure he didn't do it. But there *is* a cover-up going on, and I want to know why!"

"And if your father did kill her?" Shayne said bluntly.

"Then I want him punished!"

Shayne nodded. "You mentioned some other names?"

"Uncle Joe Dannon, my real mother's brother. Uncle Joe always hated Celia. And dear Aunt Faith and Bert. She's Father's sister. She and Bert always lived off father. Any of them could have wanted Celia dead!"

"You mentioned someone named Morse," Shayne said.

"Tom Morse," the girl said. "I think if Celia had a lover, he was

the man. Or maybe it was Angus Sinclair."

"Do you think that Morse—or Sinclair—were honest lovers or just unprincipled pursuers of married women?"

"Angus would be, I'd stake my life on that," the girl said. "Angus Sinclair is about the only *man* in Mescala besides father. He stands up to father. You must know of him, Mr. Shayne. The famous painter?"

"Sinclair? Of course," Shayne said, "the one-eyed abstractionist. Almost everyone knows him. He's in the magazines often enough. He lost that eye, and a leg in Spain, didn't he?"

"He did, Mr. Shayne. Fighting in that Civil War, when he was young. I think he would be an honest lover."

"You like him, don't you?" Shayne said, smiling.

"I do, and so did Celia," Wendy Christophe conceded.

"What about Tom Morse?"

The girl shrugged. "Morse works for father like everyone else in Mescala. Celia was acting odd lately, as if she were worried and had decided to do something drastic. I think she was going to tell father she was leaving him. She was so completely honest she would have named the man."

"And your father would have ruined Tom Morse?" Shayne said.

"Or worse," Wendy said.

Shayne nodded. "It's a motive for Morse, and for your father. Is there anything else?"

"No," the blonde girl said, "except that Sheriff Parker insists it was an accident. Ike Parker says that young Juan was at the controls and just lost control. There wasn't even a real inquest."

"Who's Juan?" Shayne said.

"A boy who worked for us," Wendy Christophe said. "His father is our sort of butler. They're Seminoles, partly. Celia liked him and was teaching him to fly. Now he's dead, too."

"How old a boy?"

"Twenty—perhaps twenty-one," the girl said, as if she regarded a man of that age as a mere child. Shayne smiled to himself. He recalled that Wendy had said she liked Angus Sinclair, and the famous painter had to be at least forty-five. Obviously Wendy liked mature men.

"Any ideas about the Sheriff being mixed up in anything?"

"No, not really. But Ike Parker is pretty young to be Sheriff. My father got him in, and that may help to explain why he just covered it all up. We buried mother, and Parker still has the plane impounded."

"What do you want me to do?"

"At least get a look at that plane! I have to know if it was tampered with! I have to!"

The pretty blonde girl was on the edge of tears. Shayne studied her. From the sound of it there

wasn't a reason in a thousand to think it was anything but an accident and a distraught girl. But there had been the muffled voice on the telephone, and why warn him away from an accident?

"All right, Wendy," Shayne said. "I'll drive down later this afternoon. You go home first. You can talk about money later."

"Thank you, Mr. Shayne. I have money."

"I'll bet you do," Shayne said drily. "You forgot to tell me your father's name."

"Major Alexander McCallum Christophe," the girl said. "We all call him Major. A man called him Colonel once, I suppose to flatter him. Father almost killed the man. You see, he never was a Colonel, and it's a sore spot with him."

"An interesting man," Shayne said.

The blonde girl left. Shayne watched her move as she walked out. A pretty and poised girl. With a father who owned a county. He wondered just what he was getting into? But he could not ignore his anonymous caller. He did not like to be warned. It was bad for business if he let a warning scare him away.

## II

PACHOBA COUNTY was a countryside of swamps, tall and dark trees, and silence. The evening sun was setting as Shayne drove

into the county, and the highway wound darkly among the trees and hanging Spanish moss. There were few houses along the road, and those few were all shacks. Only in the distance, down narrow dirt side roads, did he see lights that hinted at bigger and better houses set back on hills above the swamps.

As he drove down the dismal highway toward Mescala, the detective thought again about the warning that had come before there was anything to be warned against. The owner of the muffled voice had either followed Wendy Christophe from Mescala, or had known where the girl was going. But the caller had somehow miscalculated, and phoned before the girl arrived in Shayne's office.

Had she stopped somewhere else on the way? Or had she sim-

ply taken longer to locate Shayne than the caller expected? He could have asked Wendy Christophe if she had stopped somewhere else, and who might know about her plan to visit him. And he could have asked her how she had heard of him. But the girl was no fool, and he would have had to tell her about the call. He did not want to do that yet.

For one thing, the mystery voice could have been that of a man or a woman. It could even have been the voice of Wendy Christophe herself. It could have been the girl faking a warning call to make Shayne more anxious to take her case. Or an attempt to incriminate some unknown person.

Shayne was still thinking about the mystery-caller, and the young but poised Miss Christophe when he reached Mescala. It was dark as he drove slowly into the town. The county seat of Pachoba County was almost as silent and deserted as the highway. Shayne saw a few stray people walking in silence along the dim streets, and here and there a light in a store or saloon. But Mescala was hardly a bustling town.

Like many southern towns, Mescala was built around an open square of hard-packed dirt bounded by four paved streets. The usual military statue stood in the center of the square. The two most noticeable buildings were the Courthouse with its cells at the top, and a large office building that bore the sign: *Christophe Lumber & Feed.*

Shayne parked in the square and stepped out of his car. He crossed the hard-baked dirt to the statue. The bronze was of a small, broad-shouldered man in the uniform of a Confederate Colonel. The name was: *Colonel Cluny McCallum Christophe, CSA.*

Shayne looked up at the statue, and then turned and walked across the paved street to the Christophe Building.

On the ground floor of the large office building that, with the Courthouse, dominated the small square of the silent town, he saw the bank and the large general store. The window of the bank proclaimed that Alexander McCallum Christophe was President. The general store was named, simply, Christophe's Store.

Shayne turned and looked across the square at the looming bulk of the Courthouse. It did not bear the name Christophe on its facade, but Shayne had a strong hunch that it should have. And he had a stronger hunch that there would be very little that Alexander McCallum Christophe could not get away with in Mescala.

The shot exploded in the night.

A single rifle shot, deafeningly loud and close.

Shayne dove into the street.

The bullet whined and echoed away through the deserted square.

Shayne's chin was scraped where he had hit the concrete of the street. There were voices somewhere near the Courthouse.

The second shot kicked up a small geyser of red dirt and concrete not four inches to Shayne's left. It had come from the general direction of the Courthouse across the square. The third shot hit in front of Shayne and whined away above his head where he lay.

The shots were not a warning. The person behind the rifle was shooting to kill this time. Shayne had his automatic out and ready in his hand. His grey eyes stared through the night toward the dark bulk of the Courthouse.

The fourth shot sang over his head. The would-be killer was not a good marksman. And this time he saw the flash. He raised his automatic and fired. The distance was much too great for his .45, but it should serve to keep the rifleman off balance.

Firing, Shayne leaped up and zig-zagged across the square toward where he had seen the flash of the rifle. He reached the bronze statue of the Confederate Colonel Christophe, and ducked behind it. The rifle did not fire again. Cautiously, Shayne left the shelter of the statue and zig-zagged again toward what he now saw was an alley beside the Courthouse. His automatic was ready.

He saw them out of the corner of his eye. His attention had been concentrated on the alley mouth, and he saw them only when they had come close. There were three of them. They seemed to have emerged from the shadows of the Courthouse.

"Hold it right there!"

They were like triplets. Each of them was tall and lean, all straight lines and angles, their clothes loose as if never touching their wiry frames. Their faces and hands were like pale leather, and they wore grey whipcord trousers, pale grey shirts without ties, western boots, and wide-brimmed Stetson hats. Large empty holsters dangled at their hips and there were six-pointed silver stars on their shirt pockets.

"Just stay put, and keep that cannon nice and steady," the smaller of the three warned.

All three had the same big holsters, and the pistols were in their hard, leathery hands. They moved toward Shayne slowly and deliberately, close enough together to cover him all at once, far enough apart so that he could not cover more than one at a time.

"Now just you hand that old pistol over. Butt first would be just right."

Shayne handed over his automatic. The smaller of the three stepped out to take the gun. The heaviest of the three stepped up and searched him. The third, who was gaunt-visaged, and well over six feet in height, just stood back

and watched. It was this third man Shayne spoke to.

"You're Sheriff Parker?" he asked.

The tall man nodded. "Yeh, I am. Someone tell you about me?"

The heavier deputy stopped searching. "He's clean, Ike."

"Good and dandy," Sheriff Parker said.

Shayne snapped, "Why don't you go after the man who shot at me, instead of wasting your—"

The Sheriff raised his eyebrows. "Someone shot at you, mister? Now that's funny, I don't recollect hearing no shots. Do you recollect shots, George?"

"Not me, Ike," the heavier deputy said.

"Just his cannon here poundin' away," the smaller deputy said.

Sheriff Parker nodded. "That's the way it looked to me. Now you oughta know better than to go shooting off a gun in town. Do they let you go around shooting in Miami?"

Shayne had narrowed his grey eyes into points of steel as he listened to them talking. Either they knew who had shot at him and why, or they simply did not care. He turned to Parker.

"So you know who I am, too?" Shayne said.

"Everyone knows the famous Mike Shayne," Parker said.

Shayne was grim. "Then maybe you won't mind if I try to find who shot at me myself?"

"Well, no, only not right now," Parker said. "Right now I got a cell for you. You're under arrest, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne stared at the tall, lanky Sheriff. Parker was smiling, but the Sheriff's eyes were not amused. Parker meant business.

"On what charge?" Shayne snapped.

"Disturbing the peace'll do. Maybe discharging firearms inside the town limits. We got a law on that. Then, that car of yours is illegally parked. I guess I can find a few charges'll hold you a while. Unless you'd like to just get back in that nice car and drive on out of here."

Shayne tugged slowly on his ear. "Why not come out with the real charge?"

"And what would that be, Shayne?" Parker said coldly.

"Investigating the cover-up of a murder. That's what you—"

Shayne got no farther. Sheriff Parker jerked his head the fraction of an inch.

"George," Parker said, "he's resisting."

The heavier deputy stepped up and swung his revolver. The blow of the heavy gun exploded like a bomb inside Shayne's head. Through a red haze he saw Parker's murderous eyes for the barest instant. Then his knees gave way and he fell heavily, blacking out before his body struck the ground.

## III

THE LIGHT HURT his eyes. Mike Shayne opened them and blinked. The light shone directly into his face, half-blinding him. He was seated on a chair in a small, windowless room. There were figures behind the light. The face of Sheriff Ike Parker appeared close to Shayne.

"All right, Shayne, who brought you down here?" Parker said.

"Who shot at me?" Shayne said.

The lump on the side of his head was painful. His brain was still foggy but clearing rapidly. He knew he was inside the Courthouse, in the Interrogation room of Sheriff Parker.

"I got enough to put you six months on the road gang," Parker said harshly. "And all legal as can be."

"My secretary knows where I am," Shayne said. "I've got a permit for the gun. I've got friends in the State Police, on the Miami Daily News, and in City Hall and the State Capitol. I'm on a case for a client who's a local resident. I was shot at and I can probably prove it unless you swept up all the bullets. You'd never live down the stink, Parker."

Parker scratched his chin. The Sheriff was young, and not bad-looking in his leathery country way.

"If you were shot at it was an accident," Parker said at last.

"Someone thought I was a deer in the town square?" Shayne said.

"Maybe. Or a prowler, who knows?" Parker said.

"You like accidents, don't you?" Shayne snapped.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning my client thinks Mrs. Christophe was murdered."

The Sheriff's voice was ice cold. The other men, the two deputies, moved closer around Shayne.

"Who is your client, Shayne," Parker demanded. "This is my county."

Shayne laughed. "You know I won't tell you that. Now how about telling me where I can find Major Christophe?"

"You stay away from the Major! You hear!?"

Shayne smiled. "All right. Then suppose I take a look at the crashed plane?"

"No!" Parker snapped. "Look, Shayne, your client is wrong. We have our own law here, and we say it was an accident. The Major's had enough trouble. You leave him alone."

"And if I don't?" Shayne said grimly.

Parker stood up straight in the glare of the light. His dark eyes were like two nailheads.

"Maybe your friends couldn't help you," Parker said. "There could be another accident."

For a long minute the two men stared at each other. Shayne studied the cold, hard face of Sheriff Parker. He had little doubt that Parker would not hesitate to kill him if the Sheriff thought it necessary. Shayne was sure now that Wendy Christophe was right. There was more to the death of Celia Christophe than a simple accident. But was the Sheriff protecting himself, or was Ike Parker protecting someone else?

"You got it?" Parker said.

"I got it," Shayne said. There was nothing he could do while he was inside Ike Parker's Courthouse, and men had simply vanished in counties like Pachoba County before this. The roads were bad, almost impassable, and the swamps deep.

"Then ride on out," Parker said. "This ain't none of your affair, Shayne, believe me. Celia's dead, and there ain't nothing more to do. You just go on back to Miami and leave me to handle my affairs, okay?"

Shayne nodded slowly. "I'll have to tell my client you refused to cooperate."

Parker smiled. "You do that. Wendy don't think much of me anyhow."

Shayne tugged on his ear. "Wendy?"

"It don't take much figuring, Shayne," Ike Parker said. "Wendy was the only one around here not satisfied with the accident. She just got to be your client."

Shayne thought about the mystery caller in Miami. "Are you guessing, Parker, or do you know?"

"Guessing, but, like I said, it don't take much guessing."

"Were Tom Morse and Angus Sinclair satisfied with the accident?"

Ike Parker rubbed his chin and sighed. "You know, Shayne, you sure don't learn fast. Now I'm gonna say it just once more. You walk out of here, you get into my car, and you get driven to the county line. You walk on out of this county and you don't come back."

"My car?" Shayne said.

"It just got two flat tires," Parker said. "To show you how much we admire you, we'll have it fixed up and one of my boys will drive it back to Miami tomorrow. Meanwhile a walk'll maybe cool you down some. You oughta be able to get a car over in Paulsville in the next county."

"Thanks," Shayne said.

"Don't mention it. I got a good friend over in Paulsville, Sheriff Jacoby. He'll keep an eye on you."

"You think of everything," Shayne said.

"I try, Shayne," Parker said. "George, you drive Mr. Shayne to the county line. And, Shayne, remember not to come back this way."

"I'll try," Shayne said drily.

"You do that," Parker said.

Parker nodded to the heavier deputy who came to stand over Shayne. The red head stood up. His head still hurt, but his mind was clear. The first thing he had to do was get away from Parker and his deputies. So he followed the deputy, George, out of the Interrogation Room, along the dark and silent corridors of the old Courthouse, and out to the Sheriff's car. George motioned to him to get into the front seat.

The town square of Mescala was as deserted as when Shayne had driven in as they drove out and away toward the county line. Shayne looked at his watch. It was only nine-thirty. Out of the corner of his eye he watched the silent George. Parker had taken his automatic, and George was a big man. The deputy appeared to be concentrating on the dark highway, but Shayne could see that he was alert and ready.

They drove for twenty minutes and then the deputy stopped the car near a small shack at the side of the deserted road. The deputy got out and walked around the car, his hand resting lightly on the butt of his pistol. He opened the door and motioned Shayne out.

"This is it, peeper," George said. "The line is just the other side of the shack. Start walking. Paulsville ain't more than ten miles."

"You know I'll report this," Shayne said.

George shrugged. "We don't care what they think in Miami. Just stay out of Pachoba."

"I'll think about it," Shayne said.

The deputy scowled, swore softly, and stepped toward Shayne, the heavy pistol in his hand again. The pistol swung up, but before it could descend with violence on the detective's head, steel-firm fingers clamped on the deputy's wrist.

George's leathery face turned red with anger as he struggled to free his arm.

Shayne tighted his grip and grinned. "My turn," he said softly. He stepped inside the deputy's upraised arm and swung a short, hard left to his jaw.

George went limp and slumped silently to the ground. The gun went clattering.

Shayne looked down at the unconscious deputy for a moment. Then he bent and picked up the heavy pistol. He stood there in the night and considered what to do. He wanted very much to have a talk with Major Alexander McCallum Christophe. But it was a long walk back to Mescala, and he did

not know where the Major lived. He could use the Sheriff's car, but that would give them one hell of a charge against him.

They already had one charge—attacking a deputy, and although he did not think that self-defense would carry much weight in Mescala, stealing the Sheriff's car would give them too much. Still, there did not seem to be anything else he could do. The important thing was to reach Major Christophe. With any luck he could find a tavern open, and almost anyone would be likely to know where the Major lived.

Shayne stopped thinking abruptly. A car was approaching from the direction of Mescala, with its lights out. It was moving very slowly. Shayne glided silently into the shadows of the shack beside the road.

The car came slowly into sight, it's single occupant staring toward the parked Sheriff's car. Then the car stopped and a man stepped out. He was short and stocky. As his eyes swept over the unconscious form of the deputy he began to limp toward the fallen man. He carried something in his left hand —something long like a rifle.

## IV

AS THE SHORT man bent over the slumped form on the ground, Shayne stepped out from behind the shack and approached him cautiously. But a crackling twig caused the other to swing about, and rise up as he turned. The long object in the man's hand pointed straight a Shayne. But it was not a rifle. It was only a long, slim roll of artist's canvas.

"So you flattened George, eh?" the man said. "Good. A little rough handling will do him no harm."

The short, stocky man was smiling. He had a dark black patch over one eye, and his left leg seemed stiff beneath his trousers, as if the limb were artificial. The man's heavy face was scarred with old scars, but his eye was quick and sharp, the single eye bright as he smiled at Shayne.

"You're Angus Sinclair," Shayne said.

"I am, and whoever you are I'm on your side," Sinclair said. "I saw Ike Parker and his boys manhandling you back in the square. I had an idea they would run you out of town, so I waited and tagged along when George drove you out. I figured you might need a lift."

"You saw them arrest me?" Shayne said. "Then you were in the square?"

"I was, and I saw someone shoot at you. The way things are around here it was probably Parker himself or one of his men," the stocky painter said.

"You don't like Parker?" Shayne asked.

"No, and I don't like the Major

much, which is more important around here," Sinclair said. The battle-scarred painter eyed Shayne closely. "Just what did you do that they don't like?"

"I came to Mescala," Shayne said.

Sinclair nodded. "I understand what you mean. But you must have had a reason."

"I have a reason," Shayne said.

The painter nodded. "Which you don't want to talk about, eh? Okay, I'll buy that. If Ike Parker doesn't like you, you must be okay. Now, can I give you a lift over to Paulsville before George comes around? You won't be popular in Pachoba County when he does."

"No," Shayne said, "you can give me a lift into Mescala. Or, better, you can drive me to wherever I can find Major Christophe."

The stocky painter was silent for a long moment. His scarred face and single sharp eye studied Shayne. Then he nodded decisively.

"Okay, get in my car. You've got guts, I'll say that."

Shayne did not answer. He pocketed the fallen deputy's heavy pistol and followed the well-known painter toward the car. Sinclair limped on his stiff left leg, walking awkwardly on the artificial limb.

In the car, Sinclair made a U-turn and headed back toward Mescala. Shayne eyed the famous painter and soldier-of-fortune, and thought about his story of how he had happened to appear on the scene. It was a possible story, and yet Wendy Christophe had hinted that Sinclair could have been a lover of the late Celia Christophe.

But what motive would Sinclair have? The painter did not depend on Major Christophe, and was apparently neither under the Major's thumb nor afraid of him. Jealousy? Possibly. Wendy had more or less definitely identified Morse as Celia's lover, and Sinclair could have been jealous of Morse. If Morse had been the dead woman's lover, and if it *was* murder. Shayne still had no real proof of murder.

"What do you know about Celia Christophe, Sinclair?" Shayne said suddenly.

The painter didn't even blink. "So that's it, Celia. You must have been talking to Wendy. The poor kid took it hard, she thought a lot of Celia. What are you, a detective?"

"Yes," Shayne said. "The name is Shayne—Mike Shayne."

Sinclair nodded. "I've heard a lot about you. I suppose Wendy told you Celia was murdered?"

"What do you think?" Shayne said.

The painter shrugged. "I don't know. Parker says it was an accident. He thinks Juan was flying the plane and lost control. You know, it wasn't a bad crash. It happened right on take-off. The plane just nosed over and flipped down when it was maybe fifty yards up."

"Were you a friend of Mrs. Christophe?"

"You mean was I a lover of hers? No, I wasn't, but Wendy is terribly romantic," Sinclair said.

"She thinks you're quite a man," Shayne said.

"And I like her, but I can't say I can see a murder here."

"Who would have reason to kill her?"

Sinclair shrugged. "You've talked to Wendy. Celia was young and alive and honest. There were men, and maybe the Major found out."

"Morse?" Shayne asked.

"Maybe. He's big and handsome. "He's just the kind who might play games and then get scared about the Major. Then old Uncle Joe Dannon hated Celia. She didn't like him and might have influenced the Major against him. Then there's Faith and Bert. They live off the Major and they didn't like him marrying Celia. I guess they all expected to inherit before Celia came along."

"What about Parker?" Shayne asked.

"Ike would do anything the Major told him to do. He owes the Major everything he has. He wouldn't want to lose it."

"And what about Wendy?" Shayne said bluntly.

Sinclair turned to look at Shayne with his one good eye. "She hired you, Shayne."

"Killers have hired me before."

"Not Wendy, never," Sinclair said. "What possible reason would she have to kill Celia? They were almost like sisters. No, Shayne, you're way off base. She is far too fine a girl."

"How much do you like her, Sinclair?"

"Maybe as much as you think. But I suppose I'm a little too old, eh?"

"She admires you enough."

"Is that bad?" Sinclair said.

Shayne smiled. "No, from all I've heard of you, you deserve admiration."

"Thank you," Sinclair said, and added suddenly, "we turn off here if you want to see the Major."

It was a narrow and dark side road about a mile before they would have reached Mescala. The road was not impressive. From all he had heard, Shayne had expected a long, wide magnolia and oak-lined drive up to a collonaded *ante-bellum* mansion. But this was no more than a rutted country dirt road no better than the road to a field-hand's shack.

The road wound on for more than a mile through the low scrub trees and the swampy land. Then Shayne saw the house. The house was no disappointment. It was enormous, and colonnaded, and very *ante-bellum*.

Sinclair stopped the car almost a quarter of a mile short of the house. "I don't call on the Major much, Shayne," he said. "If you

don't mind, I'll just drop you here."

"Okay, I'll walk," Shayne agreed.

Sinclair nodded. "One word of advice. Do your talking fast. Ike Parker won't give you a lot of time, and he probably knows you want to see the Major. Anyway, one minute after you walk into that house, Sheriff Parker will know about it if the Major wants him to."

"Thanks," Shayne said.

He began to walk toward the big house that loomed like some great white ghost of the past in the night. He had walked almost half way before he heard the car motor start in the night behind him, and heard Sinclair drive rapidly away. The painter might not be afraid of Major Alexander McCallum Christophe, but Sinclair was obviously not anxious to be found on the Major's land. Shayne was growing more and more interested in meeting the man.

But it was not the Major he met first. As he reached the tree-lined walk that led up to the front door of the giant house, he heard a noise in the thick bushes of the grounds near the walk. A twig snapped.

Shayne ducked low in the dark and reached into his pocket for the pistol he had taken from the deputy, George. His hand closed on the gun, but he did not draw it from his pocket.

A man stepped out of the bushes directly in front of him. A tall, muscular and very handsome man. He held a rifle aimed straight at Shaynes' belly.

"Stay right there, Shayne!" the newcomer snapped.

Shayne stared at the handsome stranger. The man aimed the rifle steadily. And he knew who Shayne was! A man Shayne had never seen before.

## V

BUT MIKE SHAYNE could guess who the stranger was. Tall, handsome, and still young and vigorous with the muscular build women so often admired.

"You must be Thomas Morse, the great lover," Shayne said, his voice contemptuously mocking and amused.

"Why you—!"

The handsome man stepped closer, the rifle thrusting out, his finger tight on the trigger. But Shayne had a strong hunch that Morse had no intention of firing the rifle, at least not here. He made a sharp feint with his left shoulder as if to dive in that direction. As he had expected, the rifle swerved sharply toward his left to keep him covered as he made his supposed escape attempt.

He feinted left, the rifle swung, and Shayne stepped in and lunged, his right hand moving out like a snake striking. The hand closed on the barrel of the rifle and a quick, sharp jerk pulled the rifle away from the handsome man.

Shayne stepped back and smiled at Tom Morse. "Candy from a baby," he said. "You shouldn't use a rifle if you don't have the guts to fire."

Morse swore. "You dirty—"

Shayne ignored the man. He held the rifle and carefully sniffed the barrel and the chamber. The gun had not been fired recently. But it was loaded, and there was nothing to prove that Morse did not have more than one rifle.

"All right," Shayne said. "What is this all about? How did you know who I was?"

"Go to hell," Morse snapped.

Shayne eyed the man up and down. He had all the air of a strong and virile character, but underneath Shayne saw the flab—flab of mind as well as body. The man was a handsome flunky, a shell, a straw man good only to dazzle desperate women past their youth.

"All right, let's walk on up to the house and see what the Major has to say about you jumping me with a rifle on his front walk," Shayne said blandly.

As he had expected, Tom Morse's defiance began to ebb. He quite obviously had no desire to meet the Major at this moment. His small, alarmed eyes became almost pleading.

"No, I—okay, so I wanted to scare you off. I don't want anyone to try—"

'You couldn't scare a half-dead fly," Shayne snapped. "How did you know who I was?"

"Wendy told me," Morse mumbled.

"Wendy *told* you about hiring me? When?"

"This evening, when she got back from Miami. She got mad and told me she'd hired you to find out who killed Celia. She thinks I killed her!"

"Did you?" Shayne snapped bluntly.

"No!" Morse cried. "I mean, no one killed her. It was an accident! The Sheriff says it was an accident!"

"Everyone seems awfully jumpy about an accident," Shayne said drily.

"We weren't until Wendy hired you! What right have you—"

Shayne interrupted. "Why does Wendy think you killed her stepmother?" he said innocently.

"She thinks I was having an affair with her mother. Damn it, what business is it of yours? Wendy is crazy!"

"Were you having an affair?" Shayne demanded.

"No! No, damn it, and no one can say I was!"

"Not even the Major?" Shayne asked mildly.

Morse went as white as the great house towering in the night behind him. He seemed to shiver and shrink inwardly in the hot night.

"What were you going to do with that rifle?" Shayne demanded, firing his questions now without giving the other time to reflect.

"I wanted to—scare you off."

"How did you know I would come here?"

"I didn't, not for sure," Morse explained. "Wendy said you would. Then I saw Sinclair's car and I saw you get out. I knew it was you."

"You're sure you weren't in the town square a few hours ago?" Shayne demanded.

"No, I wasn't."

"Tell me what you know about the accident."

Morse shrugged in the darkness. "I don't know anything. The plane crashed, that's all. They say that Juan was flying it. I told Celia the boy wasn't ready to fly the plane yet."

"You told her? And you weren't having an affair?"

"I work for the Major, we talked often. Is that so unusual?"

"Why are you so anxious to scare me off?"

Tom Morse hesitated, looked around in the night. There was nothing to see. The grounds were deserted and the trees were tall, black shapes in the dark. Dial deflated even farther. "All right, I was seeing Celia. We—met sometimes. If you start snooping around it could all come out."

"You met just *sometimes?*" Shayne asked sarcastically.

"She liked me; she was too young for the Major," Morse said. "What good would it do if the Major found out now? I mean, she's dead. Why should I get hurt about a dead woman?"

Shayne was disgusted. "You were her lover but her death means nothing to you. It's just something to be shrugged off and forgotten. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"I'd take a risk if I stood to gain. But why rake up what's past?"

Shayne did not know whether to believe the man or not. It made sense, especially given Morse's character. But it would also have made sense if Morse had killed

Celia Christophe. The killer would not want the past raked up in either case.

"So you just don't want the boat rocked?" Shayne said.

"That's all," Morse said eagerly.

"The killer wouldn't want the boat rocked either!"

"Damn you, it was an accident! The Major believes it!"

"Does he?" Shayne said.

"Of course he does! If he didn't he'd have this county torn apart looking!"

"Unless he killed her himself," Shayne said.

Morse opened his lips and closed them again. The playboy seemed to cringe in the night, a stricken look on his face.

"You've thought about that, haven't you, Morse?" Shayne said harshly. "Maybe the Major killed her, and you'll be next!"

"No—" Morse stammered, "he couldn't have known."

"Let's go and ask him."

"Damn it, Shayne, if you even mention the idea to him I'll—"

"You'll what?" Shayne demanded, his voice still harsh with contempt.

Morse took a deep breath. "I'll kill you," he said. "So help me I'll kill you!"

And, suddenly, before Shayne realized what was happening, Tom Morse turned and ran into the darkness. The tall, muscular man vanished as if swallowed up. Shayne started to go after him, and thought better of it. Morse would keep. He had come here to talk to Major Alexander McCallum Christophe, and Sheriff Parker would find his deputy pretty soon if he had not found him and the car already.

Shayne turned and walked up the walk to the elegant and massive front door of the white mansion. A small, elderly man in the white jacket of a servant answered the door. Shayne asked for Major Christophe.

The servant took his name and ushered him into the dim, cool vastness of the front hall. Shayne waited alone. He did not wait long. The servant appeared in a doorway and waved. Shayne walked toward the doorway.

## VI

AT FIRST Mike Shayne saw no one. He stood alone in a dim, high-ceilinged room darkly paneled in oak and filled with red-velvet Victorian furniture. Heavy drapes were drawn across the windows and french doors. On the walls were weapons from the first World War, modern hunting weapons, and the older pieces dating back to Civil War days.

Shayne looked slowly around the room. It appeared empty and silent. And yet he felt that someone was there. He stepped slowly forward and saw that a small, slen-

der man was sitting in a high-backed chair.

He sat as erect and rigid as a naked sword, and his hard blue eyes were like glinting stones. His thin mouth neither moved nor changed.

"So, you are Mike Shayne. You wanted to see me?"

The voice was low, soft, nearly a whisper, and yet it carried to every corner of the room.

"I want to see Major Christophe," Shayne said.

"Then you've seen him," the small man said.

"I want to talk to you," Shayne said. "Your wife—"

"You want too much. Parker!"

The small man raised his voice the fraction of a decibel and it seemed to slash through the martial room like a knife. A door opened somewhere, a set of red curtains parted behind the Major's chair, and Sheriff Ike Parker stood in the room.

"Take him," the Major said.

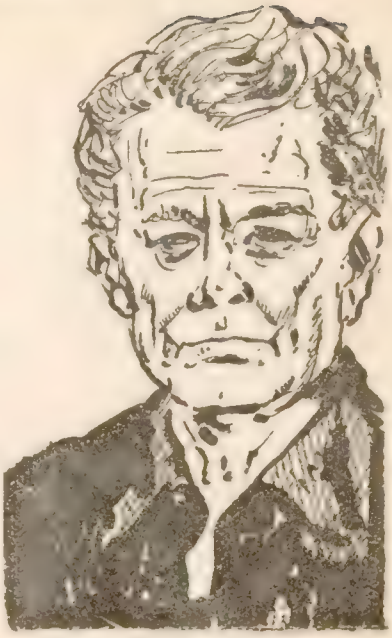
Parker stepped toward Shayne, his leathery fingers resting easily on his pistol butt. "Let's go, Shayne."

Shayne ignored the Sheriff and fixed his grey eyes on the man in the chair.

"Your wife—" Shayne began again.

"My wife is dead," the Major said. "Parker, I'm becoming annoyed."

Parker's face was suddenly red with suppressed anger. "You got



big trouble now, mister. Assaulting an officer, escaping from custody, trespassing—"

"Don't waste my time with talk, Parker. Just get him out of here," Major Christophe snapped.

Parker nodded, his lips tightly compressed. "Move, mister!"

The Sheriff stepped close to Shayne and reached out to push the redhead toward the door. Shayne let Parker push his left shoulder back, moved his right shoulder forward, dropped the shoulder a fraction of an inch, and hit Parker flush on the chin with a right hand punch that travelled no more than ten inches. Parker went down as if hit by a lightning bolt.

The Major never moved. Even the stone-blue eyes of the small man did not flicker.

Parker was tough. The blow that had felled him like a tree going over only stunned him for an instant. The Sheriff clawed for his gun. Shayne was faster. He held the deputy's pistol straight at Parker. The Sheriff took his hand from his pistol.

Major Christophe's voice was still low and soft and as clear as ice. "Mr. Shayne, you are a fool. This is my county. I have a gun in my pocket, it is trained on you, and I have a perfect right to kill you in my house."

"And I have Parker," Shayne said.

"I have lost men before," the Major said coldly.

"You've lost a wife, too," Shayne said, his grey eyes turning slowly to look at the Major. He kept his pistol trained on Parker, knowing that the Major would shoot the instant he relaxed his guard.

"My wife died in an accident. Do you really think Parker would lie to me?"

Shayne's steely grey eyes were like hard points as he studied the Major. He tended to believe the small man. Either Major Christophe really thought his wife had died by accident, or he was the calmest, coldest liar Shayne had ever met. That, too, was possible. He was a man in control of himself. Whichever it was, Shayne did not think Celia Christophe had died by accident.

"Yes, Major, I think he would under certain circumstances," Shayne said quietly.

The Major showed a flicker in his hard blue eyes for the first time. He was about to speak again when someone came into the room behind Shayne. The redhead froze, knowing that if he turned or moved Parker would have him. But the voice that spoke now was familiar.

"So do I, father," Wendy Christophe said. "I think Ike Parker would lie very quickly under the right conditions. That was why I hired Mr. Shayne."

The girl came to stand beside Shayne. Major Christophe merely stared silently at his daughter. When the small man spoke it was to Shayne.

"I trust you have a good reason for coming here, apart from my daughter's fantasies?"

Shayne was grim. "In Miami, when your daughter came to me, someone warned me not to come. When I arrived I was shot at, and not just to scare me. Sheriff Parker knew exactly why I was here. He knew, or guessed, that it was about your wife. Why do you think he resorted to open violence? Because he had something to hide, something I could find out.

"He went to a lot of trouble to convince me to leave the county. He refused to let me see you, and he refused to let me see the crashed plane, and yet I know that the plane was not too badly

damaged. Has he let you see the plane, Major?"

"There was no need," the Major said slowly, not looking at anyone but Shayne. "He said it was an accident, and I believed him. Why would he lie to me?"

"Why wouldn't he let me see the plane if it was an accident?" Shayne said. "One careful look at the plane and I would have left the county, the case would have been closed, your daughter's suspicions would have been proved wrong."

There was a heavy silence in the room. Wendy Christophe was watching her father. Parker was staring with hate at Shayne. The Major turned his cold blue eyes toward Parker.

"Why would he lie?" the small Major demanded.

Shayne looked at Parker. "Because he's your man, Major. You see, I'm pretty sure that Parker thinks that you killed your own wife. He lied to everyone because he thought he was protecting you!"

Again there was a silence.

"Why would I kill my wife?" the Major said.

"Because of the men," Shayne said.

Ike Parker half rose from the floor. "Shayne, you'll rot on the road gang! I'll see that you never get out of this county—"

Major Christophe was on his feet, his whiplike body as rigid as a steel rod. His voice cut through the room. He was staring down at Ike Parker.

"Did you think I would kill Celia for *that*? Did you?! You stupid fool, did you imagine I didn't *know*? Did you think I just discovered Tom Morse and went out to kill like some juvenile boy who couldn't hold a woman?"

Ike Parker seemed stunned. "I didn't—"

Wendy Christophe cried out. "So you *did* know! Oh, father, how could you?"

The Major whirled on his daughter. "You too? You think I would kill Celia for *that*? I loved her, you stupid child! She was young, too young for me. She needed men, admiration. If she wanted Tom Morse, I was willing to shut my eyes and pretend that it was a harmless flirtation. When she tired of him, then I would know how to handle Tom Morse!"

Shayne spoke quietly. "Not many men would think that way, Major. It is a good motive for murder. I don't think you can blame Parker for believing you killed her."

The Major nodded. "Do you think I killed her?"

"I don't know, but I intend to find out," Shayne said.

The Major nodded. "Very well, I'll help you. Parker, *was* it murder? Can you prove it?"

Ike Parker stood up now. The Sheriff was pale where he had

been red-faced only a few minutes ago.

"I can prove it, Major. The tail controls had been half cut through. They gave the first time Juan used them in the air. I thought—"

"We know what you thought, Sheriff," the Major cut in abruptly. "So you would let me kill Celia and get away with it eh? We'll have a talk about that later. Just now I think we'll talk to the others. It had to be someone who had something to gain, and who knew she was to fly that day. That narrows it down to this house, and a few outsiders like Morse."

"And Angus Sinclair," Shayne said.

"And Ike Parker," Wendy Christophe said.

Parker jumped two feet. "Me? You can't—"

The Major looked at Parker. "It's possible, except Celia had better taste. What about it, Parker? Where you covering for me or yourself?"

"I never went near that airport!"

"We'll see," the Major said grimly. "Now we'll talk to my fine relatives. Wendy, have Jose get them up. All of them."

"Now? It's late, father, and—"

"Get them!"

## VII

THERE WERE THREE of them. Uncle Joe Dannon, brother of the Major's first wife, was a fat old man of about sixty-five. Dannon faced the Major with arrogant, open defiance.

The old man seemed as tough as the Major.

"All right, Alex, I hated her guts and I'm not sorry she's dead. But I didn't kill her. Someone beat me to it!"

Faith and Bert Shreve seemed to tremble as Dannon defied the Major. Faith, the Major's younger sister, stood close to her husband. Bert Shreve, a scrawny, cipher of a man tried to smile at the Major while at the same time trying to appear very sad over the death of Celia Christophe.

"You know we got along fine with Celia, Major," Shreve said smoothly.

The Major laughed. "Sure, because you're both hypocrites! At least Joe is honest. You hated her as much as he did. Both of you. You've been living off me for years, and you expected to live better off my estate when I passed on. Celia worried the hell out of you. You knew she'd finally get it all."

"The little tramp!" Faith Shreve cried.

"That's better," the Major said. He looked at Dannon. "Well, Joe, maybe you'll tell us all where you were that day?"

"Maybe I will, and maybe I won't," Dannon snapped. "What makes you think it was murder all

of a sudden. It was Ike Parker who said—"

"Ike Parker is a fool," the Major snapped.

Shayne put in, "Parker admits it had to be murder now. Someone tampered with the tail controls. Someone who knew she would be flying, had access to the plane, and wanted her dead. You three all qualify."

The fourth newcomer in the room had stood silent and alone against the far wall near the door. Now he looked up, his dark eyes flashing. A small, thin man in a white coat. It was Jose, the servant who had admitted Shayne earlier.

"Murdered?" the old man said, his brown face set in lines of grief and anger. "They murder and my Juan dies? Who did this, Mr. Major? Tell me who kill my son?"

Everyone looked at the old man. The Major's face softened for the first time that night. He stepped to the old man and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Jose. Someone wanted my Celia dead and killed your Juan, too."

Joe Dannon laughed coldly. "Are you, Alex? Who says you didn't kill her yourself? You knew what she was up to. You knew about Morse and maybe Angus Sinclair."

The Major whirled angrily to answer Dannon. But the Major did not speak. In the short silence, old Jose had begun to talk. He spoke

low and sad, talking almost to himself. They all watched the half-Indian in the white jacket.

"I tell Juan it no good to fly. I tell, but he want to fly. He want to do much, yes. Mrs. Major she teach him fly. Mr. Morse he teach Juan to ride the horse, to talk good. All the time Juan want to learn. The one-eyed man teach him to paint the pictures. Very good with pictures, the Mr. Sinclair say. Now he dead. I tell him it no good for us to know too much. I tell him."

Wendy Christophe spoke sadly. "Juan was right, Jose. It was right for him to try to learn. He was a bright boy. Angus Sinclair said he could be a good painter. You should be proud, Jose."

"No!" the old Indian said. "Not for Indian boy. I tell him no good. I think he listen. Yes, he listen. He stop painting for the Mr. Sinclair. But he unhappy. I think he listen to me, but now I know he unhappy and he keep flying. A whole month he stay home and I am

glad. All no good he says, all fake, and I am glad, he stop trying to be what he is not. He is sad, but I am happy, I think he stop all. But he fly and now he is dead."

The old man stopped and there was an uneasy silence. But not for long. Uncle Joe Dannon swore harshly.

"Okay, so it was bad luck for Juan. What about this murder? I admit I wanted her dead, but I didn't even know she was flying that day. I was in Mescala all day and I can prove it! That's ten miles from the airport. And I know she wasn't planning to fly. She must have changed her mind. Maybe you knew she changed her mind, Alex!"

Shayne was watching them all. Dannon seemed to be telling the truth. He looked at the Major who was growing angry again.

Shayne tugged on his earlobe. "Didn't she fly every day?" he asked.

"No," the Major admitted.

"Did she change her mind?" Shayne said.

"Obviously, damn it," the Major said. "But she didn't tell me. As a matter of fact, now that I think, she was supposed to be going on a trip to Miami that day. I assume she changed her mind."

Shayne looked at Faith and Bert Shreve. "What about you two?"

"We knew she was going into Miami," Bert Shreve said. "She never told us about changing her mind."

"What about Tom Morse or Angus Sinclair," Shayne asked. "Would she have told either of them?"

Major Christophe exploded. "Damn it, Shayne, what's all this about Angus Sinclair? Everyone thinks he's so tough because he battles me in my own county! Does he claim to have been Celia's lover?"

"No, as a matter of fact he denies it," Shayne said.

"He better!" the Major snapped. "Wendy, that's his speed. A foolish child. Oh, he's a great dazzler of the ladies, he is; that's how he really makes his living. He makes ten times as much from those Ladies Club Lectures he gives than he does on his painting. They just love his heroic legend, that battered appearance! He's a lousy painter. I checked with real art critics once. But the Ladies Clubs, and those national magazines prefer a romantic legend to a real painter. The battered soldier of fortune!"

Shayne shrugged. "You're sure Celia wasn't one of the women he dazzled with his romantic legend?"

"I'm sure, damn you."

"And Morse?" Shayne said.

There was a silence. The Major was grim. Wendy Christophe looked at the floor. Uncle Joe Dannon grinned maliciously.

"I told you I knew about Morse. But why would he kill her? He

probably enjoyed thinking he was fooling me," the Major said.

"Maybe he was afraid she would tell you," Shayne said. "He didn't know you already knew, did he? I've met him. I think he might kill her if he thought she was going to be honest with you, Major."

The Major nodded slowly, grimly. But before he could answer, or anyone else could speak, Faith Shreve suddenly spoke out.

"She was with him," Faith said.

Shayne turned to her. The Major stared at his sister.

"What?" the Major said.

"She was with Tom," Faith said. "I—I followed her. She said she was going to Miami, but I knew she wasn't. I followed her and saw her meet Tom Morse at his place. They went inside. I was going to tell you. I didn't know you knew. I was going to show you what she was, but then she died that day. There wasn't any reason to tell you then."

"You followed her?" the Major said. "Then you were the last to see her! You followed her, and you —You killed her!"

Faith Shreve shrank back. "No! She went inside with Tom Morse and I came home! I was going to tell you but you were out. I never saw her again."

In the silence that fell over the room, Shayne tugged hard on his left ear. The redhead was thinking about Tom Morse. The man was weak and scared. A man who might kill from fear of being discovered cheating with the Major's wife. And Morse used a rifle. It was a rifle that had shot at Shayne. Morse knew who he was.

Shayne looked at Wendy Christophe. "Morse told me you told him I was on the case. Did you?"

The blonde girl nodded. "Yes, I couldn't resist. I told Tom you'd find out who killed her."

Still, Morse could have known already. He could have been the mystery caller in Miami.

The Major looked around the room. "Unless they're all lying, Shayne, and they all could be, I'm not ruling it out, then Morse is probably the only one who knew she was going to fly that day after all. They all say they thought she was in Miami. I thought that, too."

Shayne tugged harder on his ear. "I think we better have a talk with Morse."

The Major wasted no more time. "Parker!"

With the Sheriff behind him, Major Christophe stalked out the door. Shayne followed. Unless they were all lying, which was possible, as the Major had said, then Morse was the only one who could have known Celia would fly that day. Except, perhaps, Wendy Christophe. The blonde girl knew about Morse; she had been in her stepmother's confidence. But Shayne let that pass until he had talked to Morse.

He hurried after the Major and

Sheriff Parker to where Parker had his car parked. In the car they drove swiftly through the night toward Tom Morse's house.

## VIII

THOMAS MORSE stepped back from his door as the three men pushed in. He protested the invasion, but Major Christophe pushed him aside and stalked into the living room of the small house. The Major looked around with obvious distaste. For a moment his eyes fell on the opened bedroom door. Then he turned to face Morse.

"She was here that day. Don't deny it. Did you kill her, Morse?"

Tom Morse stammered, "I don't —know."

"Stop it, Morse. Try to be at least a little worthy of her!" Tom Morse stared at Shayne. "He told you! I said—"

The Major cut him short. "I've known for over a year, Morse. You must really take me for a fool, or consider yourself very clever. Well, you made a stupid blunder. She wanted you physically, all right, and I let her have you. But if you killed her, I'll make you wish you were never born!"

Morse looked at Sheriff Parker. "But it was an accident! Parker said so."

"Parker was lying," Shayne said. "I think you had better start talking."

Morse stood there for a long moment and blinked at the three of them. Then he sat down slowly in a deep armchair. He sat on the edge of the chair, as if unaware that he was no longer standing. He looked up at them. He tried to smile.

"She—she insisted I make love to her. She came here. I'm not very strong, I guess. She was pretty, and she—well, I lost my head completely."

"And you enjoyed thinking I'd be wearing a pair of horns," the Major snapped. "Never mind your dirty motives. Did you kill her!?"

"No," Morse whispered. "I thought it was just an accident. She was a little drunk when she left. I thought she just lost control, or Juan did."

Shayne said, "Start at the beginning, Morse. She came to see you that day? You had an arranged meeting for the day?"

Morse nodded. "Yes, she always arranged it. She told everyone she was going into Miami. Then she came here. We had some drinks, and—"

Sheriff Parker was eager. "And you fought, had a battle. She was going to come clean with the Major. That scared you. So when she changed her mind and went flying, you fixed the plane!"

"No!" Morse shouted, his face ashen. "She never said anything about the Major. We didn't fight or anything. I went with her to the airport. I even—"

Morse stopped. The handsome but weak man seemed to realize he had said something he should not have said. He looked up in utter dismay. It was Mike Shayne who spoke first, asked the question.

"You were there?" Shayne said. "You saw it?"

Morse hesitated, and then slowly nodded. "Yes, I was there. I saw them get in, and taxi away, and take off. I saw the plane just slide off, nose over, and crash. They didn't get out. Some men ran to the plane. I could see they were dead."

The Major swore like a tiger. "You just drove away! You didn't even know she was dead, and you just drove away! I should beat you to pulp!"

"What could I do? She was dead, and there was nothing I could do. I didn't want to be found there."

Shayne said, "Did you see anyone around the plane when you arrived?"

Morse shook his head. "No one. Even Juan wasn't there. He was late, said he'd been at Sinclair's studio."

Shayne considered the handsome man. A killer should have a better alibi. And yet Morse seemed to be the only one who could have known that Celia Christophe would fly that day after all. Unless Wendy Christophe, or the Major, or someone else were lying.

Shayne tugged on his earlobe thoughtfully. "Why did Mrs. Christophe change her mind and go flying, if you didn't have a fight?" he said.

"She didn't change her mind," Morse said. "Not exactly."

The Major swore. "Damn it, man, she told everyone she was going to Miami, and she came here for the afternoon. She couldn't have *intended* to fly when she made up that Miami story."

"She didn't intend to fly, Major; she just forgot when she made up the Miami story," Morse explained.

"Forgot?" Shayne said. "Forgot what?"

"That she was supposed to be there for Juan," Morse said.

"You mean for Juan's lesson?" Shayne said.

"Yeh," Morse said. "It was supposed to be his first solo. It was his big day, and she had forgotten. When she remembered, she said she couldn't disappoint the kid. Not for his first solo."

"Solo?" Shayne said softly. "But you said they—"

"The kid chickened out," Morse said. "Juan said he hadn't felt right, and he didn't feel ready to solo. So she went up with him."

Shayne was frowning heavily now. "The boy was going to solo?"

"Yeh," Morse said. "I figured he'd lost his head and caused the crash. That's why—"

But Shayne had stopped listening. Words were going around in

his mind. Juan wanted to learn. Juan took all kinds of lessons. Juan had been dejected, unhappy, lately. Juan had stopped going to his painting lessons at Sinclair's studio.

Shayne's voice was eager. "Who could have known that Juan was going to solo that day?"

Morse blinked. "I don't know. His friends I guess. I knew when Celia told me. He'd been at Sinclair's studio."

Shayne remembered the sudden and so convenient appearance of Angus Sinclair on the highway after he had knocked out the deputy. Shayne turned toward the door. The Major and Sheriff Parker looked at him.

Shayne motioned to them. "Let's pay a call on Sinclair," he said grimly.

## IX

THE SHERIFF'S CAR drove slowly up to the rustic studio of Angus Sinclair. It was set on a small hill behind the house where Sinclair lived just off the main highway to Mescala. There was a light in the studio. Shayne motioned to the Major and Parker to be silent, and began to creep up the small hill to the nearest ground floor window.

Angus Sinclair was working inside. He was not painting, he was bent over a desk writing. In the light the big black patch over his eye made him look like some fabled pirate of lustier days on the Spanish Main. His artificial leg was stretched out stiffly beside him.

Shayne backed away from the window and the others followed him. Shayne turned to Parker and the Major.

"I've got a hunch, but I can't prove much," Shayne whispered. "We'll have to trick him if we can. I want you two to stay out here and listen and watch. Keep you gun ready, Parker."

"But, Shayne, I told you Sinclair had nothing to do with Celia," the Major whispered in the dark night.

"We'll see," Shayne said.

"Why you, Shayne? I'm the law here," Parker said.

Shayne shook his head. "No, it has to be me. Sinclair knows I'm here, and he knows why. So far he doesn't know we know that the crash was no accident. He thinks I'm working alone, and that's just what I want him to think. Now keep me covered. I may need you."

Without another word, Shayne crept off into the night. After ten yards or so he stood up and walked boldly to the door of the studio. The painter opened the door to his knock.

Sinclair seemed surprised. "Come in, Shayne. How did it go at the Major's place?"

Shayne stepped inside and crossed to the table where Sinclair had been working. The artist-soldier-

of-fortune closed the door behind Shayne and followed him into the room.

Shayne saw that Sinclair had been working on a magazine article about *Art in Modern Warfare*. He turned to face Sinclair. The artist lighted a stubby pipe and watched the Miami detective.

"I asked how it went at Christophe's," Sinclair said, limping across the big studio room to deposit his match in an ashtray. "Did you learn anything interesting?"

"That depends on what you consider interesting," Shayne said, and added, "I talked to Juan's father."

"Did you? A nice man, old Jose, but a trifle weak in the brain," Sinclair said.

"Not like Juan, right?" Shayne said. "Juan was very bright, I hear."

Sinclair nodded. "He was. I was giving the boy lessons. Did I tell you?"

"No, you didn't," Shayne said.

"Well, I was. Only student I ever took. The boy touched me, somehow, you know?"

"How? Was he very impressed by your legend? The hero-painter, soldier-of-the-people in Spain?" Shayne said.

Sinclair studied his pipe in his thick hand. The famous artist looked up at Shayne. The room was very quiet.

"I suppose he was," Sinclair said evenly. "Many people are."

"Mostly women, I hear. Like young Wendy, and all those club women you lecture to, and the woman magazine readers. I see you're doing an article. *The Artist in Modern Warfare*. I understand you make a lot of money on lectures and magazines."

"Yes," Sinclair said evenly. "I make a lot of money with my lectures and the magazine pieces. I write books, too. Is there something on your mind?"

"Perhaps," Shayne said.

"Tell me about it. I'm interested."

"I imagine that all that, the lectures, books, magazine pieces, are really based on your legend—the soldier-artist, the fighter for the cause of freedom, all that. I expect that you would be just another so-so painter without the legend to make you a special person the public finds fascinating."

"Sort of a side-show character, ch?" Sinclair said.

"In a way. A public figure instead of an artist. It must be very lucrative," Shayne said.

Sinclair nodded slowly and worked over his pipe. He crossed the room to his desk and looked for a pipe-tool. He found the tool and began to dig into the bowl of the pipe. He spoke without looking up.

"What is all this leading up to, Shayne? I thought you were on a murder case. I'm a little surprised you're still walking around free in the county after being at Christo-

phe's house. What happened? Did they convince you it was an accident after all?"

Shayne watched the artist closely. When he did not answer at once, Sinclair looked up at him.

"As a matter of fact, Sinclair, it is now clearly murder. The killer did too good a job on the tail controls. The plane did not crash hard enough to destroy it. Parker knows it was murder."

Sinclair put down his pipe. "And you think I killed Celia? You'll have a hard time with that fantasy, Shayne."

"You showed up very conveniently on that highway tonight. I think you were watching to make sure I was run out. You admitted being in the square, and I think it was you who shot at me. For a soldier, you're a very bad shot with a rifle that close. I think I can probably prove you were in Miami this morning, following Wendy Christophe."

"I went to Miami this morning, I admit it. But I had no idea Wendy was there," Sinclair said.

"Maybe," Shayne said. "She'll probably remember telling you, or seeing you around, but it doesn't matter so much. What interests me is something you didn't do when you picked me up on the road."

"And that is?"

"You didn't guess what I was doing in the county. You never mentioned Celia Christophe or the accident. Everyone else guessed right away. Everyone else seemed to know who I was and what I was doing here."

"Meaning?" Sinclair said sharply.

"Meaning that you didn't want me to think you had any interest in the whole affair," Shayne said simply.

Sinclair laughed aloud. "And that is supposed to be a clue to my being the murderer of Celia Christophe?"

Shayne raised a shaggy red eyebrow. "Did I say Celia Christophe was murdered? No, her death was an accident, I think."

"Accident? Then what the hell—"

The famous artist stopped. Shayne watched him carefully. Sinclair leaned down with his hands on the desk in front of him. His eyes were flat, hidden as he stared at Shayne. Then Sinclair began to nod slowly up and down. Shayne was grim.

"Yes, Sinclair, there was another victim of that crash. No one thought about that. Celia Christophe was so important in this county. No one thought about poor Juan."

"Juan? You think I killed Juan?" Sinclair said softly.

"It figures," Shayne said. "Celia being there was a surprise, you knew Juan was supposed to solo. Celia was both a good and a bad accident for you. As long as every-

one was sure it was Celia who was the intended victim, that was good for you. But if she hadn't been there, Parker would probably never have bothered to even inspect the plan. Of course, you had expected the whole plane to be destroyed."

Sinclair seemed to have heard none of this. He was still leaning across his desk, his knuckles white where he pressed his fists against the desk top.

"Just why did I kill Juan? What possible reason could I have?"

"I'd guess it was to protect your reputation, your legend, and your income," Shayne said.

"How the devil would—"

Shayne had inched closer to the famous artist, and now, suddenly, he leaped. His big hand darted out and pulled the black patch from Sinclair's eye. Sinclair jerked back, but too late. The eye beneath the patch was clear and bright and obviously as good as any normal eye. Shayne nodded.

"That's what I thought. I expect the leg is a fake, too. I don't know how you got the scars, but I'll bet not in any fight in Spain or anywhere else. Your a fake, Sinclair. Your legend is a fake. And Juan found it out! No more impressed women, no more national fame, just a second-rate painter!"

"You can't prove a damn thing!"

"I'll make a bet we find the rifle you used to shoot at me," Shayne said, "and I can tell the world what a fake you are, and—"

The Luger appeared as if by magic in Angus Sinclair's hand. The painter had opened his desk drawer unseen and the pistol was now aimed straight at Shayne.

"The damned kid caught me! It was stupid to take him on as a student. I'd never risked it before. I lived alone. But the kid was so full of hero-worship I couldn't resist. One of the Major's retainers! But he walked in unexpected one morning, and he caught me without the patch or the brace on the leg. I had to kill him! He wouldn't listen to reason. He would have told!"

"So you heard he was to solo, he told you, and you fixed that plane," Shayne said.

"I fixed it too damned good, but that doesn't matter. Now I'll have to kill you, and then no one will ever guess! You're too smart for your own good, Shayne!"

Sheriff Ike Parker and Major Christophe stepped through the door that was to Sinclair's right now. Parker had his pistol out and cocked.

"Smarter than you, Sinclair," Parker said. "Drop it. Drop it now!"

Angus Sinclair hesitated for the fraction of a second. Then the painter swung his Luger and fired. Sinclair fired four fast shots from the automatic. Ike Parker shot only once. But the fake-hero was no better a shot than he was a hero. His shots all missed. Ike Parker did not miss.

Angus Sinclair lay on the floor of his studio, the bullet through his heart. The famous painter was dead.

Parker bent down and pulled up the pants leg of Sinclair's artificial leg. Under the trousers there was a long metal brace strapped on the perfectly good leg to make it appear stiff.

Major Christophe looked down at the dead man, and then at Shayne.

"He wanted to kill Juan," he said slowly. "Celia was just an accident after all."

"I'm sorry," Shayne said, and meant it.

Ike Parker stood up. "How did you figure it, Shayne? I mean, I never thought about Juan being the victim."

Shayne rubbed his gaunt chin. "It was his father, Parker. I remembered what old Jose had said. Juan quit Sinclair's teaching. Juan was dejected, sad, moody, and talked about a *fake!* When Morse mentioned that Juan was supposed to solo, I took a calculated guess. I was right."

"Yeh," Parker said, "you sure were. No hard feelings about the way I handled you?"

"Give me back my automatic and fix those tires on my car, and I'll forget it," Shayne said with a smile.

"I just thought I was helping out the Major," Parker said.

"I won't forget it. I'll talk to you tomorrow, Ike Parker," the Major said, and looked down at Sinclair again.

"Wendy'll take this hard, about Sinclair. About Celia dying for nothing."

"She has to learn that heroes can have clay feet," Shayne said. "Now how about my car? I've got work in Miami. Also a headache. You can send me a check for my work, Major."

"You earned it," the Major said. He looked at Parker again. "You wouldn't consider taking on a Sheriff's job? I could get you elected, especially after this. Poor Juan was well-liked."

Shayne shrugged and turned to leave the studio of the dead fake-hero. Shayne remained grimly silent all the way to the Sheriff's car. The Major was a hard man; he would let Parker sweat for quite a while.

Ike Parker deserved to sweat. By his cover-up he had almost let a killer escape.

Suddenly Mike Shayne felt tired. It was late, but that was not what made him tired. He was thinking of a poor boy killed to protect a fake legend, and of a young woman dead for no reason at all except that she had tried to teach the boy to fly. But perhaps it was Alexander McCallum Christophe who had really lost the most, and that made Mike Shayne very tired. He had rather liked the Major.

# A WELL-PLANNED DEATH

**They played on a man's fears . . . to make vengeance pay off.**

by DENNIS LYNDS

BEN MADIGAN sat silently in the dark. They were coming to kill him. He sat alone in the unlighted room of the house above the sea, and waited patiently. In

another hour at most they would expect him to be a dead man. He was quite certain.

It would be just as Ben Madigan had planned it.

It was the second part of his careful plan. He had worked out the entire scheme with great care during those long last nights in prison. Now the first part was successfully over. He had escaped cleanly from Don Marco's office, and he had the money. All the money. All the money he would ever need. A cool half million, all safely checked where he could pick it up in a matter of hours. Now the second phase of the plan was about to begin.

The room he had selected was on the second floor of the house, on the low cliff overlooking the sea. They knew about his admitted fear of heights; he had made certain of that also. They liked to know exactly how to use a man's fears against him, how to turn him to jelly. Madigan remembered what had happened to Ed Talbot.

With Talbot it had been water. Ben Madigan was an excellent swimmer and had no fear of water. But Ed Talbot could not swim and had a morbid fear of drowning. So they had drowned Ed Talbot. That was the way they worked. They found your weakness and they used it against you until they broke your strength to fight them. The cops said Talbot had been caught in an undertow when swimming, but Ben Madigan knew better.

They never gave up, either. Ed Talbot had been so sure he was safe, forgotten. Talbot had changed his name, changed his face, even changed his habits, which had been a hard thing to do. Talbot had moved two thousand miles, but they found him. You were never safe from them if they were after you. Not while you were still alive.

The cops were no better. You could hide from the cops, yes. But you couldn't come out of hiding. They didn't chase, but they watched, and you had to be careful all your life. And Ben Madigan had no desire to spend his life cooped up in some room no better than a cell. He had hated prison, the small cells that caged him in, the silence, the intolerable threat of solitary, where a man could go insane.

Madigan wanted to be rich, safe, and free. He had ten years to think about it. He had conceived his plan during his last year in prison. It fitted all his requirements, but he knew that it would take nerve and careful arranging. But Ben Madigan had nerve. His scheme would leave him with a great deal of money, safe from pursuit, and out in the open. It would also square his score with Don Marco.

He owed Don Marco a bad time. Or, rather, Don Marco owed him

a good time. Madigan had been a fresh young engineer just out of college when Don Marco had dangled the lure of quick money in front of him. Don Marco had needed a Civil Engineer to tunnel safely into a bank. Madigan had done the job, been paid handsomely, and had been forever marked as a criminal.

He had been thirty years old when Don Marco let him take the ten-to-twenty jolt for nothing. He owed Don Marco a reckoning for that frame-up, and it was not the least part of his plan that it would even the score. Madigan had only one thing to thank Don Marco for —the hoodlum had kept him hidden, and Madigan was relatively unknown to police and underworld alike. It was going to make his plan work in the long run.

In the years he had worked for Marco, Madigan had added safe-cracking to his other engineering skills. He was one of the best boxmen in the East, maybe in the whole country. He could crack any crib that wasn't welded into a solid sheet of metal. The problem was getting to the safe—and getting away. There was one safe he knew about that was filled with money on the third of each month, that he could get to easily, and that he could get away from without the cops even knowing about it.

The safe in Don Marco's office.

Marco was sure he, Madigan, was loyal—hadn't he taken the ten-to-twenty without a murmur? The hoodlum would never report a theft to the cops, who probably wouldn't do more than laugh if he did. Madigan thought about it from every angle to be sure. He was not going back to prison. Not for anything.

The ten years in prison had changed Ben Madigan. He could not adjust to being caged. He lost thirty pounds, his hair turned almost white, and he aged beyond his forty years. Sometimes at night he found it hard to breath. And Don Marco had done it to him. The one safe in the world he wanted to rob was in Don Marco's office.

There was one big problem. He was sure he would be safe from the police and prison, but the hired killers of Don Marco were more dangerous than the police. He was afraid of them because they knew all the tricks. You could run, but you could not escape. Not while you lived.

It was then that Madigan remembered his first civil engineering job—a sewer system in a small Eastern city that he had worked on while he was still in college. He had gotten the job through a classmate whose father was the enginner in charge of building the system. The main pipe emptied into a small estuary a few hundred yards from the open sea. And it emptied under water.

In his cell Madigan sat and

searched his memory. Yes, the pipe ran for almost its full length under the surface. But a few yards back from the sea it angled gently upward. At low tide the pipe was above water level when it was no more than twenty-five yards from the sea. The outlet was always under the surface, for it had been designed that way, and there was a row of houses on a cliff above the sea just where the pipe came out.

Madigan racked his memory to make sure that he was not in error about that pipe. He remembered it clearly, and the many side pipes that branched off from it. Any one of those side pipes terminated in factories near the water and led up to manholes. In his cell Madigan sat and grinned to himself. The plan would work. While you were alive they would never stop hunting you. So he would not be alive.

But Ben Madigan was a careful man, and when he got out of prison he went quietly to that Eastern city to make sure of his memory. A lot could change in twenty years. He checked the tide heights, and they were the same. Then late one night, he broke into the office of the city civil engineer to check the sewer system.

The map of the system was on the wall where he had framed it and put it up himself. He studied it closely. His memory was accurate. The elevations showed that at low tide the pipe was clear of sea water, starting twenty-five yards back from the sea. The side pipes were all there. The first one, to a small iron works, was only forty yards from the edge of the sea. He made a careful copy, and left as silently as he had come.

From the engineer's office he went to the houses on the cliff and was again in luck. In the twenty

years the city had changed, and the dwellings were all rooming houses now. He took a room on the second floor of the house nearest to the hidden opening of the large sewer pipe.

As a final check, Madigan went down to the waterfront embankment at low tide and peered over. He could see the wide mouth of the main sewer pipe about five feet below the surface of the clear water.

He took the next train back to New York. On the train Madigan smiled as he looked out the window. He could barely refrain from laughing out loud. His first job had been that sewer system, and now it was going to make a success out of his last job.

He had always taken great satisfaction in that first job, he remembered. A man's first job is important to him. Perhaps, though, not quite as important as his last one. Madigan's smile grew considerably wider when he thought of the satisfaction he was going to take in his last job.

He reported to Don Marco as soon as he arrived in New York. The racketeer would expect that, and Madigan had no intention of alarming Don Marco in any way. The big gangster shoved one fat hand at Ben Madigan, his fleshy face wreathed in a false smile.

"Ben, boy! Glad you made it. Not so bad, eh?"

"Bad enough, Marco," Ben Madigan said. "But that's how it goes. I knew the risks. You hire men to do a job."

"And the lock-up is part of it, right?" Don Marco said. "Glad you're a smart man, Ben. So okay, now you're out. You go back to work?"

"Any time, Marco," Madigan said.

"Good. You got a nice little bundle coming. I take care of my boys."

Ben Madigan smiled. Yes, Don Marco took very good care of his boys, and Ben Madigan was going to have a very nice bundle coming, indeed. He was going to make sure of that. To Don Marco, Madigan smiled and looked grateful.

"Thanks, Marco," he said. "I better not hang around here much, though. I'm on parole, you know. I better stay clear of your boys for a while."

"Sure, you're right, Ben boy," Marco agreed. "Take a rest, maybe a couple of months. After that we talk about new jobs, right?"

"I got to get some new tools," Madigan said casually. "I need a stake, and you can fix it with the supplier, okay? I need a whole set of safe tools. Better to be ready."

"Check," Don Marco said. "You sure you feel okay?"

"I'm a little jumpy, I guess. Ten years up there gets to you. It's funny, but I got a real fear of high places now. I never had that before. I can't get close to a high

window without wanting to jump. I guess I need rest."

"Afraid of heights, eh?" Marco said. "That's too bad. Okay, I'll fix the tools. Here's a grand on account. You take a rest."

Don Marco magnanimously peeled a thousand dollars in one-hundred dollar bills from a roll as thick as the racketeer's arm. Ben Madigan took the money and left. He spoke to most of Don Marco's boys before he left. They were very friendly.

Madigan managed to mention his new fear of heights to all of Don Marco's hired guns. He noted with satisfaction that they all mentally filed away the information for future use, if needed. He wanted them thoroughly convinced of his fear of heights.

He bought his new set of safe-cracking tools, and took a small room in a cheap section of town. He knew that he was being watched—Don Marco trusted no one. Ben Madigan had taken a false conviction, so Don Marco would watch him for a time. While he was waiting for the right time, he double checked his copy of the sewer system and placed it carefully inside a waterproof envelope in his wallet.

For two months Ben Madigan did nothing but rest. Then the day came when he was sure that Don Marco had relaxed his suspicions just enough. Madigan did not want Marco to stop watching him completely. He wanted Marco's men close behind him when he put the second part of his plan into operation. The first part of the plan required nothing more than practicing with his new tools, and waiting for the third of the month.

The third of the month came finally. That morning Ben Madigan got up with a smile on his face and whistled all the time he was shaving. As he ate a leisurely breakfast he looked out the window of his room to make sure Don Marco still had a man watching him. The man was dutifully there. A younger member of the racketeer's organization, and not too bright. Just what Madigan had expected by now. Marco was relaxed.

Madigan made no attempt to hide his activities as he methodically began his preparations. He openly bought a train ticket for the city where the sewer system was. There would be nothing suspicious about that—not at this point. He bought a small but expensive suitcase with a good lock on it. There was nothing particularly suspicious about that yet, either.

Later, the two facts, reported by the gunman on his tail, would be very suspicious.

Then he easily evaded his shadower, and went to buy a ticket on a tramp steamer for South America. This would be suspicious, so he had to evade his tail, but he made it very easy for Don Marco to discover the South American

ticket later. That was not hard. He simply evaded his follower in a large building where there were many offices, but one office was an obvious travel agency.

After he had bought this ticket he let his shadower pick him up again. Later, the exact point of his disappearance would be reported to Don Marco, and the racket-boss would spot the travel agency at once—considering what would have happened by then. He observed that, as he had expected, the young punk trailing him did not seem too bothered by his brief vanishing act.

With the stage now set, Ben Madigan had a good lunch, spent the afternoon enjoying the Zoo in Central Park, and generally led his follower expertly and permanently. When this was reported, Don Marco would begin to wonder, but the racketeer would never imagine the truth.

No one robbed Don Marco. Not, at least, until now. No one could get away with robbing Don Marco. Not until now.

Ben Madigan picked up his safe-cracking tools at his room, made sure he was not being observed now, took the small suitcase he had bought, and headed for the office of Don Marco.

Madigan knew the layout of the racketeer's office like the palm of his hand. The office was dark, but there would be a man on guard inside. Madigan walked straight up to the office door and boldly knocked. He heard the sound of faint movement and the door opened a crack. One of Don Marco's best men peered out.

"Evening, Halsey," Ben Madigan said pleasantly. "Marco told me to bring these suitcases to the office."

"Yeh?" Mark Halsey said, the sound of perpetual alertness in the killer's voice.

"I guess he's ready to send me back to work," Ben Madigan said, inching his way into the outer office of Don Marco's suite. "I figure nobody gets paid for nothing forever."

"You had it soft for awhile," Halsey said, the suspicion draining from the killer's voice.

Halsey stepped back, took his hand from his pocket, and let Madigan come into the office. The killer suddenly reached for the two suitcases. The tools in the larger suitcase made an obviously metallic sound as Mark Halsey hefted the case. Halsey was no fool. The weight of the tool-case dragged down one arm. The other suitcase was obviously empty.

An empty suitcase, and a case containing tools, could mean only one thing to Mark Halsey. The killer dropped the two cases, and his hand headed rapidly for his pocket again. Halsey was too late. Ben Madigan smiled and dropped the killer with a well-handled blackjack.

Madigan locked the outer door, tied Halsey securely with a length of rope from the tool-case, and gagged him. Then Madigan went to work on the safe. It was a good safe, but not that good, and Madigan had it open in five minutes flat. He had not lost his touch.

He shoveled the money, the whole take of a month of Don Marco's operations, into the empty suitcase, and locked it. The safe he left wide open, and was on his way out the door before Mark Halsey even began to groan with returning consciousness.

Madigan estimated that the way he had bound Halsey should make it impossible for the killer to break loose in less than an hour. Madigan did not need an hour. There was always the possibility that someone would find Halsey sooner.

Precisely seventeen minutes later, Ben Madigan was on the train to the seashore city. If his estimations were correct, and he was sure they were, Don Marco's hoodlums would be after him in just about fifty-three minutes, give or take ten minutes. The young shadow would tell his story, and Marco's killers would be on their way to get him in the oceanside city.

Ben Madigan made one stop on his way. The train stopped for two minutes at a station. Madigan was off the train, checked the suitcase of money in the baggage room where they would keep it inviolate for six months, and was back on the train before it pulled out. The rest of the trip was uneventful. He went to his room in the house on the cliff above the sea.

Nothing had gone wrong—except that Madigan's estimation of the time had been, apparently, too generous. Don Marco and his killers were not as smart as Madigan had thought. He had been waiting in the room in the house above the sea for four hours, and still they had not come. Could something have gone wrong?

Madigan went over it all again in his mind. They must have found out about both the train ticket and the ticket for South America by now. Mark Halsey must have raised the cry against him. They must have guessed that he was hiding out here until it was time to sail to South America. He had counted on them being close behind him.

Then he heard the noise. In the corridor outside his room. He smiled. They were there. He stood up and edged toward the window that was open and ready. He waited. He did not have to wait too long.

The door was kicked open. Mark Halsey stood in the room with his pistol pointed straight at Ben Madigan. Halsey was not alone. There were three of them.

Ben Madigan feigned horrified surprise. His shoulders jerked and he staggered back toward the high window.

"No!" he croaked convincingly. "Wait! I—"

Mark Halsey said coldly, "Where is it, punk?"

There are, of course, risks in every line of work, in every worthwhile endeavor. The risk Madigan had taken was that they might shoot him immediately. But it had not been much risk. They did not work in a hurry, and they would be unlikely to kill him without the money in their hands. Don Marco

would have instructed them forcefully about that.

They would expect him to have hidden the money. They would would have questioned the landlady of the rooming house about the number of suitcases he had. She would have told them only one. Halsey's eyes had already taken in the whole bare room, and the suitcase of money was obviously not there.

"I'll get it!" he begged. "I'll give it back! Don't kill me! I tell you, I'll—"

"Tell me! Quick!" Halsey snapped.

The killer slowly walked toward Madigan, forcing him back toward the open window. Madigan gave a wild glance behind him.

"Not the window! No! No!" he wailed.

Mark Halsey looked at the open window. The thin lips of the killer curled into a sadistic grin. There could be no doubt that Halsey had just remembered Madigan's carefully-told fear of heights.

"Talk, punk," Halsey said viciously, "or out you go!"

Halsey continued to force Madigan back. Madigan reached the window. Halsey had partially lowered his pistol, and his eyes were fixed on the window and on Madigan.

Madigan assumed a look of total terror, but still held onto the window. Suddenly he swayed, appeared to lose his balance, gave a loud scream, and toppled out through the window.

He screamed loud and clear all the way down. He knew the distance to the inch. The moment he was sure he was hidden in the dark from the window above, he jackknifed into a vertical position and entered the water in a clean dive. Under the surface of the deep bay he went down and down, made a sharp turn, and surfaced. He swam quickly for the entrance to the sewer, only a few yards away.

They would already be running down from his room, out of the house, and down to the edge of

the sea. They would not assume he was dead, not yet. That would take time. He reached the entrance to the sewer, surface-dived, and swam into the dark water of the pipe. He swam powerfully under the water. When his lungs were about to burst, he surfaced. His head came out into the air. He was inside the sewer. It was easier than he thought it would be.

He wanted to laugh in triumph. But there was still work to do. It was always possible that they would find the entrance to the sewer and decide to search inside. He had no time to waste in gloating. He swam on until his feet touched the bottom of the pipe. Then he began to walk.

He took out his waterproof flashlight and the map of the sewer system he had wrapped carefully in water-proof plastic. He read the map, and headed for the first side pipe. The sooner he got out of the sewer the better, and forty yards back from the edge of the sea would be enough in a dark night. Before they even stopped looking for him in the sea, he would be on the train back toward his money and a quick jet flight to anywhere but South America.

He reached the first side pipe and stopped. There was no side pipe.

There was a round hole where the side pipe had been. The hole was clogged with earth. Madigan looked at his map. The next side pipe was thirty yards back on the other side.

Thirty yards back, on either side, there was no pipe. There was another round hole filled with dirt. Madigan blinked and looked at his map.

A half an hour later,and a hundred and fifty yards back into the main pipe, Ben Madigan stood and stared at a solid wall of dirt. The main pipe ended in a wall of dirt. Ben Madigan looked at his careful map. It was all there on the map. All the side pipes, and the main pipe reaching for miles under the city. All marked clearly on the map.

Ben Madigan dug with his hands at the wall of dirt. It was obviously solid. Madigan returned to each side pipe and clawed at the dirt. They were not silted up, there were no side pipes. There was only solid earth.

There were no side pipes, and the main pipe reached one hundred and fifty yards. A short hole under the ground—with no exit except the sea. He had made some mistake! But how? When?

Ben Madigan stared at his map. He had copied it exactly. He knew that. He sat down in the pipe and stared at the map for hours. The only way out was back into the sea, and Don Marco's killers would still be out there searching. By the time the water reached him where he sat, and he began to wonder how high the sea would come in the

pipe, it was much too far to swim out under water.

LATER THAT morning, after the sun had come up and the tide had reached high water and was on its way out again, the city civil engineer came into his office for work. His clerk was waiting for him. The clerk reported that a small boy, fishing, had seen the body of a man wash from the old sewer pipe and float up out of the sea.

"Some stranger," the clerk reported. "The police haven't identified him yet. I guess the poor guy didn't know the water fills that pipe all the way at high tide."

"What was the poor devil doing inside the old pipe anyway?" the city engineer said.

"Who knows?" the clerk said, reaching for a cigarette.

The clerk looked up at the framed map of the sewer system that hung on the wall. The city engineer, too, looked at the map that hung beside his desk.

"Why do you keep it there?" the clerk said. "I mean, it doesn't mean a thing since we had to change to the treatment plant to clean up the bay, and had to block up the old system. Anyway, no one hangs system maps anymore."

"It was my first job," the city engineer said as he looked at the framed map. "My Dad built it, and I did my first engineering work on it. A friend of mine hung it there on the wall. Ben Madigan. It was the first real job for both of us. I never did know what happened to Madigan. I just keep the map for decoration."

"It can't do any harm, I suppose," the clerk said.

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**In the Next Issue—A Shocking Novelet**

## THE TERRIBLE FOOTSTEPS

### By T. C. McCLARY

*Was he madman, fanatic—or just plain fiend incarnate? One thing was certain. His hapless girl friends were shapely, fashioned for love and very dead—strangled by their own pony tails!*

Featuring

# FRANCES BASCOM IVY

# Killer's Corridor

## by CHARLES VENTURA

*When family trouble develops in an almost medieval setting the cunning of a killer can add some hair-raising complications*

THE DRIVING RAIN had slackened to a drizzle, but patches of low-lying fog still presented a visual hazard as Frances Bascom Ivy drove slowly off the highway and approached the towering, vine-covered walls that protected the Madden estate from prying eyes.

She stopped at the foot of a massive, medieval-looking drawbridge and touched her horn lightly. A tall man, looming bulky in a black slicker, left the shelter of the gatehouse at her signal and approached the sporty white Mercedes. Poking his dripping rainhat into the open window of the redhead's sleek convertible, he allowed his black eyes to rove admiringly over the seated figure.

"Relax," he said. "You'll have plenty of time for a smoke. That drawbridge machinery is getting crankier every day."

He gave the sweatered contours another slow glance and dropped his eyes caressingly to a pair of temptingly exposed knees before re-entering the chalet-like cottage.

Frances Ivy lit a cigarette, settled back in the seat and mentally reviewed the previous night's

phone call that had caused her to leave her tiny Manhattan penthouse and drive through this early-morning rain to the Madden's walled-in acres.

She recalled Marian Madden's tense, edgy voice. "Please drop everything and come up to the castle the first thing in the morning," she had pleaded. "Someone is trying to kill mother. No, I'm not pulling your left foot. I'm in deadly earnest. Her life is in danger. I can't tell you more than that, right now. Please don't fail me, Frances. Your presence could mean the difference between life and death."

Marian was a longtime friend and former schoolmate. Frances knew that the tall, Amazonian athlete was not the excitable type.

The slow descent of the drawbridge brought her back to the rain-swept present. The ancient looking span moved protestingly, with hollow groans and the eerie clank of chains, finally settling into place with a tortured, rasping sound.

Frances Ivy cast an appreciative glance through the break in the stone wall. On the opposite side of a swiftly flowing stream that formed the moat for the estate she saw two gleaming macadam lanes thread their ways through billowing mist. The roads wound upward through a dense hilly forest of spruce, interlaced with luminous, ghostly white birch.

The dripping rainhat poked through the car window again. "You'll have to take the service lane, the one to the left," he cautioned. "There's a big ditch across the front drive, near the castle. The workmen who installed a new heating system for the pool didn't have time to fill it up yesterday. The madam and Miss Marian are taking their before-breakfast dip in the nice warm pool, right now."

Frances shivered involuntarily. "Br-r-r! In this chilly drizzle?"

"You know those two," said the attendant. "They're like polar bears. The madam never would have installed a heating system if her two boy-friends hadn't complained about the cold."

He leaned further into the window, his rainhat sloshing water on the seat. "You've never driven over the service drive, have you? Better take it real slow in this overcast. It's full of pot-holes. The garbage truck broke a wheel up next to the cliffs, the other day and scared the driver half to death. Can't blame him. If a car goes over, it's a fall of two hundred feet."

She nodded curtly and slipped her car into gear. The gatekeeper slowly withdrew his head but kept a pair of hairy hands on the car door.

"Remember now," he said. "Don't drive more than ten miles an hour. It's not very comfortable to lie cold and dead at the bottom of the cliffs."

Turning away from the probing eyes, she set the car in motion. Frances noted, through gaps in the wind-blown fog that the service lane followed a circuitous route. At this stage, she was actually driving almost directly away from the castle.

As the car jounced along she thought, with some annoyance, that it would have been much more sensible for her to park the car and walk. It was a scant fifty feet from the drawbridge to the first of a series of stone steps that led to the main wing of the building.

After what seemed an interminable lapse of time, Frances finally found herself once more headed back toward the rear wings of the huge, sprawling edifice on the hill. It looked stark and forbidding in the gloom.

Drawing closer to the turreted old pile, she saw that the road now skirted rock cliffs on the left. Peering over the edge, she saw, during a flash of lightning, a sheer drop to the turgid waters of the Hudson and the railroad tracks that skirted the river.

"What a spot for a murder!" she murmured.

A loud crash and a penetrating shriek furnished an off-stage accompaniment to her thoughts. She wondered for a moment if her overwrought imagination had conjured up the sounds. Her braking of the car was automatic. She peered into the writhing branches and dense undergrowth.

Orienting herself, she realized that the sounds had come from the walled-in swimming-pool section of the castle. She stepped on the gas. A few moments later, her car skidded around a turn and under an archway that led into a flagstoned courtyard.

An apparently nude figure ran toward her through the mist. As the runner approached the car Frances could see that Marian's ample bosoms and generous curves were partially concealed by a scant, flesh-colored bikini.

"I heard you coming up the drive," her friend gasped. As Frances stepped into the drizzle she was enveloped in an Amazonian embrace.

"Gosh, am I glad you're here!" Marian said. She steered the redhead toward the castle's massive front door, emitting a continuous flow of chatter enroute.

"Do you remember those huge, hideous marble gargoyles on the castle's main tower?" she asked and continued talking without waiting for an answer. "One of them came tumbling down a few minutes ago and missed me by inches. It obviously was meant for mother. We had just stepped out of the swimming pool and mother stopped to play with my dog. Whoever pushed that marble monstrosity off the tower thought mother was me, probably because she

stopped to play with Fifi. As you know, we look almost like twins in a dim light and at a distance."

"I heard a scream," said Frances.

"That was mother. She let out a yowl like a banshee after that hunk of marble crashed on the terrace in front of me. I was too paralyzed with fright to utter a sound. There is no question about it, Frances; this was a third attempt on mother's life."

The redhead looked at her curiously. "A *third* attempt?"

"Yes," Marian said with a deep sigh. "Come in and help calm the old dear and I'll tell you the whole incredible story. Andrews will be out for your luggage as soon as he dares to leave mother's side. Everyone in the house is trying to pacify her, at the moment."

## II

THE HURRYING PAIR spurned the lift in the main hall and dashed up the stairs into the high-ceilinged drawing-room. Frances Ivy saw the mistress of the manor, clad in the twin to Marian's flesh-colored bikini, seated on a red sofa hemmed in by a twittering ring of assorted domestics and three sketchily attired men.

Sheila Madden caught sight of the girls through the milling group and beckoned. "Please, Marian," she said, "get these idiots away from me. No, not you, darling," as a tall, flaxen-haired young man in a black dressing-gown and Chinese red house-slippers moved away. "I mean these cackling females."

She pushed a hand away. "For heaven's sake, Mimi, get that damn smelling salts away from my nose," she pleaded. "You know I'm not the fainting type. And will you please stop breathing down my neck, Anna? That garlic breath of yours is suffocating me."

Sheila's petite French maid shrugged eloquently and withdrew a small green bottle. The woman addressed as Anna straightened up with an indignant snort. Frances recognized the snorter as Mrs. Holcomb, the housekeeper. Mrs. Holcomb opened and closed her mouth like a stranded fish before taking the bottle from the maid and stalking from the room, a picture of outraged Victorian dignity.

The servants made an unobtrusive exit, leaving the field to the fair-haired young man Mrs. Madden had reassured—a deeply-tanned Latin type in a maroon-colored bathrobe and a slim, erect little man in English walking-shorts and sweater that almost matched his shock of gray hair. Frances recognized the latter as Dr. Robert Worthington, the family physician and a longtime friend of the Maddens.

Sheila beamed and extended her arms. "Frances, darling! I'm so glad you could accept our invitation."

Frances bent and submitted to a feather-light kiss. The blond young man acknowledged Mrs. Madden's introduction as Baron Eric Von Mott with a stiff bow and brought his house-slippered heels together smartly. Dark haired Pini Di Malo captured the redhead's hand and kissed it with Latin gusto. Dr. Worthington waved a friendly greeting.

"Run along, boys," trilled their hostess. "I want to have a nice long chat with Frances. It's strictly girl-talk and wouldn't interest you wolves."

Bob Worthington kissed his hostess dutifully on the cheek. "If you need me again, just scream," he said. "I'm going upstairs to finish the sleep you interrupted with that god-awful yelp."

Sheila threw the medico an enigmatic look. "I'll notify Mrs. Holcomb to give you more blankets, Bob. I didn't realize your rooms were so cold that you had to sleep in that outfit."

Worthington grinned cheerfully. "You know my after-dark habits better than that. I still sleep in the raw. Andrews laid out my walking togs last night before I went to bed. It was easier to slip into them than a dressing-gown. See you later in the day, dear. It may take some time to scrub off all of that marble dust from my hands, so don't expect me too soon."

"Very funny," said Sheila, as the doctor left the room.

Di Malo and Von Mott took turns kissing their hostess with considerably more warmth than Worthington's formal peck. The blond German clunked his heels together again, made his stiff little bow and headed for the door, with Di Malo in his wake.

Sheila looked after the departing pair with a fond smile. "That Eric is a character, isn't he?" she said. "I do believe that handsome kraut would click his heels if he were barefoot. He and Pini are houseguesting with me until I take off for the French Riviera. They are such a comfort to me in my old age. Don't laugh, dear. I feel as old as King Tut's grandmother, today."

Frances Ivy gazed admiringly at her hostess. In the huge room's subdued lighting she could easily have passed for her daughter's age. Her skin was firm, her body well-rounded and her ebony tresses de-

void of gray. Her luminous black eyes were, if anything, more youthful than Marian's.

Sheila pulled Frances to the sofa, beside her. As the redhead sank into the cushions, she looked up and saw a panel in the mahogany walls slide back and a tanned face appear.

Opening her handbag and palming a small pistol with one smooth motion, Frances Ivy leaped to her feet and stepped in front of her hostess.

Sheila and Marian gaped in amazement. They peered past their gun-brandishing friend, saw the panel finish its slow descent and burst into peals of laughter.

A frightened looking young Puerto Rican stepped into the room.

"That's only Armando with the flowers for the dining room," said Marian.

The panel slid back into place. The startled newcomer stood rooted to the rug, with two large hampers of yellow roses in his hands.

Frances chuckled and slipped the pistol back into her handbag. Sheila smiled reassuringly at the flower-laden figure.

"Don't look so alarmed, Armando. Miss Ivy thought you were Bela Lugosi. I haven't had a chance to tell her about the secret elevator we unearthed a few weeks ago." She turned to Frances Ivy.

"Let me tell you about our hidden elevator, Frances. A few weeks ago, I uncovered a set of old blueprints in one of the unused tower rooms and learned of this intriguing relic of the slave-running days. Seems the original owners used it to slip their contraband slaves in and out when the authorities examined the premises.

"It had a primitive rope pulley. I modernized it. Armando saves a lot of time and steps to and from the lower terraces, the gardens and the greenhouses." She giggled suddenly. "Poor Armando. I'm sure he got the shock of his life when you leveled that pistol at him."

The smile left her face. "I'm glad Marian persuaded you to remain here for a while, both as a dear friend and as a private investigator. It looks as though I am really in grave danger."

Sheila Madden pulled a heavy plush cord. A woman in a maid's uniform appeared. "Alice, show Miss Ivy to her rooms."

Mrs. Madden arose and gave the redhead an affectionate pat. "Run along to your quarters, dear. I know you'll want to freshen up a bit. Alice will take your order for breakfast and bring you a tray. We'll get together later, for our talk. This swim-suit is beginning to make me itch in the darnedest places, or maybe it's just my nerves. I need a hot, relaxing shower."

Marian winked at the redhead. "Come on, mother. You can get

out of that cold bikini and into somebody's warm bed while I change my clothes and our little private eyeful gets settled. We'll have plenty of time to brief her on the case of the jittery old philanderess."

Sheila laughed heartily. It was obvious that she was anything but offended. The two Maddens linked arms. Frances watched the statuesque pair disappear through the door before following the maid to her suite.

## III

FRANCES IVY had finished off a breakfast of bacon, eggs, tea and toast and the maid was removing the tray from her bedside table when the phone rang. The caller was Marian.

A few moments after their brief telephone interchange her friend was at the door, looking larger than ever, in tight white shorts and halter.

"Let's keep this huddle confidential," Marian cautioned. "I want you to get a clear picture of what's been happening before being exposed to mother's vivid imagination. She's too wrought up to present the facts in the right perspective. Not that I blame her. This thing is pretty grim. It's almost taken the old girl's mind off of her favorite pastime."

Frances stifled a smile. There was no need to ask the nature of Mrs. Madden's favorite pastime.

Marian settled her voluptuous length on the divan and eyed the figure that peeped through the redhead's white negligee with respect.

She said absentmindedly, "You're as much of an oddball in your own way as mother. I personally know three young, handsome, rich and ardent bachelors who would give their all, including a wedding-circlet, to snuggle up to what I'm looking at. And, here you are, risking your life daily as a private-eye, instead of basking on some millionaire's yacht."

The redhead blushed. "Let's dispense with the unwholesome flattery, dear, and get down to cases, if you expect me to find out who-dun-it."

"Very well, ducky. I'll try to give you a rundown to date. It all started last Sunday, when mother became nauseated at breakfast. She has the digestion of an ostrich and the stamina of a lady-wrestler, so I was really alarmed when she turned chalk-white and doubled up with pain.

"It was a lucky thing for her that Dr. Worthington was spending his usual weekend with us. He sent for a stomach-pump, after giving mother first-aid."

Her pause gave the next words more impact. "There were traces of arsenic in the contents of her stomach. Now, I'll try to anticipate your questions. Mimi, her

personal maid, served mother's breakfast on a tray in her rooms. The breakfast came up from the kitchen in a dumbwaiter that serves her bedroom on one side and mine on the other. No one else uses it."

"Are there any other dumbwaiter stops between the kitchen and your floor?"

Marian shook her head. "It's private, just like the elevator mother and I share, going to and from the swimming pool."

"Do you know what Sheila had for breakfast?"

"She ate eggs-benedict, specially prepared for her by Franz, the chef she brought over from Vienna last year. Dr. Worthington had the remains of her breakfast, including the orange-juice, coffee, cream and marmalade analyzed. Not a trace of poison in anything."

Frances said, "I think it might be a good idea to examine the ropes and pulleys of the dumbwaiter carefully. I noticed on one of my previous visits that one of your servants was putting out poison for the pigeons that roosted on the roof at a spot near my quarters. The lift could have been used to carry a leaky bag of bird repellent or something to and from the roof."

Marian looked at her friend with respect. "Dr. Worthington said the same thing. He brought out a man from the village and had the entire length of the shaft and the dumbwaiter mechanism gone over. The results were negative."

She gave an exasperated sigh. "That brings us to the second incident and the reason for my frantic telephone call, last night. You've seen the lift mother and I use to and from the swimming pool. It has doors that open on opposite sides of our fourth floor suites, one into mother's dressing-room, the other into my bedroom.

"Last night, we prepared for our customary dip before retiring. I was ready a short time before mother and rode down to the pool level without incident. A few moments later, mother pressed the button in her suite. The car came up and the door opened. Just as she was about to set foot in the damn thing, it dropped like a plummet and crashed at the bottom of the shaft." Marian shuddered at the memory.

Frances said, "Has anyone checked on the pulleys and cables of your private elevator in recent months?"

"Mother had every elevator in the house gone over by the crew of experts who modernized the hidden lift you saw Armando using. That was less than two weeks ago." Marian settled back on the divan. "What's your next question, Sherlock?"

"I'll ask the obvious one. Who stands to profit by your mother's death?"

Marian guffawed. "That, my

dear, is the sixty-five million dollar question and there are nine answers. Mother is rumored to have sixty-five million. She has bequeathed a million apiece to Dr. Worthington, her two current boy-friends, Di Malo and Von Mott; Andrews, the butler; Franz, the chef, Hans Rudolf, the gatekeeper; Mrs. Holcomb, the housekeeper, Mimi, her personal maid and Armando, the gardener you saw.

"I know it sounds crazy," she added, "but mother has a racket. As you may be aware, her reputation for luxurious living is only surpassed by her notoriety as the most penny-pinching woman in the upper income brackets. She hates to touch an unnecessary cent of that Midas-like income of hers, so she makes it a point to show her last will and testament to all of her retinue, each time her attorney makes any changes at her behest."

Marian shook her head. "She really is a character. She knows that all of her legatees are anxious to curry favor with their post-humous benefactor, so she never keeps any money around the house. When anything arrives C.O.D. whoever happens to be around at the time, gets stuck with the bill. She doesn't even hesitate to borrow from her menage when she can find a good excuse.

"When they pay the tabs, they're afraid to ask for the money—after seeing the fantastic sum mother has willed to them. It's even worked for Dr. Worthington. He hasn't presented one single bill during the years he has been looking after us *and* the servants."

She laughed with genuine amusement. "Even those two phoney boy-friends of hers have been taken in by the act. When you can con two con-men of their caliber, you're really clever."

Frances said, "Please forgive me for asking such a personal question, dear, but how much are you down for in Sheila's will?"

Marian's hesitation was apparent. "I may as well come clean.

Mother hasn't any millions to bequeath. There is no question as to the value of the estate father left, but mother can't touch a penny of the principal as long as she lives. She gets the full income until my twenty-fifth birthday, when half of the income comes to me during my lifetime. If either of us dies, the income goes to the survivor. The principal remains intact until, or perhaps I should say, unless I produce a male heir."

She paused to collect her thoughts. "After mother and I are gone, three-fourths of the principal goes to my son, or sons, as the case may be. Any daughters I have will have to get along on the income from the remaining fourth. Father was the old-fashioned type. He didn't trust any woman's judgement in money matters."

The redhead lifted an inquisitive eyebrow. "There's one thing I don't understand, Marian," she said. "How did Sheila ever persuade your family attorney to draft these fraudulent wills, through the years."

"He didn't. The attorney who drew up the papers at the time of father's death doesn't know a thing about mother's crazy bequeaths. She has a local lawyer named John Hills draw them up from time to time as the mood and urge strike her. Mr. Hills has no idea of our financial status, except what he can guess from our mode of living."

"What about the castle?" the redhead asked.

"That comes to me outright when I'm twenty-five," Marian said. She looked at her friend with shining eyes. "Day after tomorrow is my twenty-fifth birthday. I've been saving this as a surprise. You remember Lord Lothian, the handsome Englishman who used to date me at finishing school? He and I are going to be married, this coming Saturday. Gordy Lothian arrives from London on my birthday."

Marian rose and threw her arms around Frances. "I want you to be my bridesmaid at the ceremony."

Frances hugged her tightly. "I really am happy for you, Marian," she said. "I know your mother has kept you on a pretty short leash all these years. How does she feel about the castle coming to you on your birthday?"

"Her feelings are a little mixed, at this point. She knows she has a home here as long as she lives and she likes the idea of my picking up all the bills for upkeep and taxes. However, she is not too happy over my plans for the future."

There was a determined ring to Marian's voice. "I told mother that I've already engaged an entirely new domestic staff to report here when Gordy and I return from a two-month honeymoon. I also told her that there will be no room in the castle for her two boyfriends or any new ones she may

pick up, after Gordy and I move in."

She laughed happily. "I expect to fill the whole place with children."

## IV

FRANCES IVY joined Marian and her mother in the latter's suite, at one o'clock. Mrs. Madden had decided to forego her traditional Saturday brunch in the castle's huge dining room and had arranged a buffet table to be set up for the three of them. Her face was troubled.

"I think we should have a strategy huddle," she said, "and there's no point in having the suspects listen in."

She gave a slight shudder, went on: "Seriously, Frances, I find it difficult to convince myself that someone in this house is trying to do me in, despite all the evidence to the contrary. It's just too macabre. What would you advise me to do?"

Frances Ivy's gaze was direct, her expression grim. "If you really want my advice, Sheila, I would suggest that you take off for the Riviera a couple of months sooner than you originally planned. I know you hate hotels, but you can rent a fully staffed cottage at Eden Roc or some other spot near your favorite stamping grounds and have all the comforts of home without having to worry about every bite you eat and every step you take."

Mrs. Madden's facial expression was one of shock. She looked at Frances as though she couldn't believe her ears.

"That's utterly out of the question," she said frigidly. "I couldn't possibly crowd my entourage into one of those tiny cottages. Besides, I own a thirty-room villa in Cannes and I always move my entire staff into it."

Marian shook her head and exchanged glances with the redhead. "You're not listening, mother. Frances is suggesting that you go alone, for your own safety. You can always pick up good servants on the Riviera. If you don't like the Eden Roc cottages, move into your big house and staff it with new people. And I don't have to tell you that male escorts are a dime a dozen on the Riviera. Just don't make the mistake of putting any of your new boy-friends in your will and you'll be as safe as a virgin surrounded by eunuchs."

Sheila looked at her daughter curiously. "You wouldn't be planning to run me out of the castle the day it becomes your property, would you, ducky?"

"Now really, mother. How wrong can you be? Aren't you forgetting that Gordy and I will be away on our honeymoon for two months and have you forgotten what I said about the place being all yours until our return?"

She sighed. "It isn't as though I hadn't told you over and over again that this castle is your home as long as you live. It's not you but your menage that I'm determined to get rid of."

Her mother smiled. "I suppose Gordy would be jealous if Eric and Pini stayed on. I understand perfectly, dear. However, I wouldn't like living here or anywhere else without my regular staff *and* whomever I chose to houseguest with me. I'll come to see you and Gordy occasionally and play with my grandchildren, I hope, but I intend to make Cannes my permanent residence. My menage and I will be long gone by the time you lovebirds return."

Sheila Madden arose from the table, went to her desk, scribbled hurriedly and handed the redhead a slip of paper.

"Frances, I know you can't afford to neglect your business to solve my problems. Here's my check for two thousand dollars. It's a retainer. It's worth a lot more than that to find out which of my servants has gone berserk. I simply can't throw them all overboard because one is obviously mad. I'm depending on you to track the poor thing down. When you do, I want your promise that you will help me keep him, or her, out of jail. I'll see to it that the poor creature is placed safely in a mental institution. It's the least I can do for the deluded fool."

Frances looked askance at her hostess. "You've got to be joking, Sheila," she finally said. "Judging from what you and Marian have told me, you could be murdered at any moment. Neither I nor anyone else can protect you around the clock from a homicidal maniac or a cold-blooded killer who is right here under your own roof."

"Nonsense," Sheila said curtly. "You're just being here is protection enough. Everyone in the castle knows of your reputation as an investigator. You've never failed to corner the culprit. No one will try anything while you are here. Your only problem is to track down the person who made three tries at my life, so I can put the poor thing out of circulation."

Marian said, "Mother has a point, I must admit. Even a nut will think twice before trying anything right under your pretty nose. Let's play it her way, at least for a few days. Perhaps you can find out who-dun-it before Gordy and I take off on our honeymoon."

F. B. Ivy shrugged. "I see I'm outvoted. I'll go along with you, much against my better judgement. Now, if you two Alices in wonderland will excuse me, I'd like to prowl around the house a bit, if you don't mind."

She hesitated. "Perhaps Marian will show me around. First, however, I'd like to go over the wall panels in your suite, Sheila, as a safeguard. This old building may

be honeycombed with secret panels like the one you unearthed in the drawing room. It's quite possible, you know."

Sheila looked intrigued. "Marvelous idea, darling," she said. "Marian and I will help. Tell us what to do."

"If you really want to help, keep out of my way," was the good-natured response. "Just keep your seats and relax. This won't take long."

Frances started at the end of the room, working her fingers over the carved figures in each corner and tapping each panel lightly. "Nothing here," she said. "Now, may I examine the paneling in the other rooms?"

"Of course," Sheila replied. "Marian and I will stay right here and behave while you feel your way around the rest of the quarters."

When she had inspected the panels in the other rooms, Frances returned to find mother and daughter chatting gaily about Marian's honeymoon plans.

They both looked at her inquiringly.

"I've found nothing that could be construed to be a threat to your life, Sheila. Shall we take off, Marian?"

Mrs. Madden cleared her throat nervously. "You won't disturb Pini and Eric, will you, darling?"

Marian snickered. "Don't worry mother. I won't allow this charmer within a hundred yards of your boy-friends."

## V

BACK IN HER quarters, after a round of the castle with Marian, Frances Ivy took a warm shower, donned shorts and halter and sat back to review her findings.

She had discovered that the stone parapet upon which the displaced gargoyle had rested showed unmistakable signs of chiseling. It was apparent the marble figure had been loosened from its foundations prior to being catapulted down onto the terrace. Her guess was that the chiseling had been done some time before the murder try, possibly on the previous day.

Frances' and Marian's combined efforts had failed to produce even a semblance of motion in the three remaining monstrosities on the tower parapet.

Other than the tattletale chisel marks, the site revealed nothing in the line of clues. The tower topped a deserted wing of the castle. Any member of the staff, or a house-guest—even an outsider could have gained access to the roofed-in enclosure by climbing the stone stairway that linked the tower with the lower terraces.

Frances had examined the elevator shaft that led to the Maddens' fourth-floor suites and found exactly what she expected. Every strand of the obviously new cable,

except one, had been cleanly severed. The single strand showed plainly by its frayed ends that it had pulled apart under strain.

Her gaze roamed idly over the wood panels of her suite's living-room. She thought of the tour of Sheila's quarters that had preceded her inspection of the castle. She got to her feet swiftly and began a systematic probe of the walls. Satisfied that this room had no secret entrance, she started on the bedroom walls.

The inspection had almost concluded when her probing fingers touched metal, behind a carved figure on the panel. She moved the metal gently from side to side. Nothing happened. She pressed down. The panel began a slow descent.

She drew the Venetian blinds, then locked and bolted the door to the main hall. Rummaging through her luggage, she came up with the powerful flashlight that was an indispensable part of her travel equipment.

Poking her head cautiously through the aperture, Frances directed the flashlight beam into the darkness. The dank smell of enclosed stone assailed her nostrils. A long corridor stretched away into the distance.

She directed the rays of her flashlight toward the stone floor, directly beneath the opening and found what she was looking for. Reaching gingerly through the opening, she pressed down on the bit of metal she saw imbedded in the stone floor. The panel began a slow descent. She pressed again. The panel halted and rose to its former position.

Satisfied that she would not be trapped behind the thick, solid mahogany panel, Frances snapped off her flashlight and stepped through. She couldn't repress a shudder as the heavy panel closed silently behind her, leaving her in inky blackness.

Frances Ivy made sure there was no trace of light ahead before she again flashed the probing beam down the corridor. Advancing slowly, she examined the stone walls and floor, enroute. It had occurred to her the moment she entered the passageway that hidden snares might make a death-trap of this stone tunnel. Not a sound penetrated its tomblike length. It was like walking in a vacuum.

The light beams from her flashlight bounced off a solid looking stone wall that blocked the corridor. She examined the floor and walls around the barrier but could find no sign of an opening lever or switch.

Placing a shoulder against the stone barrier, she pushed with all of her strength. The wall moved almost imperceptibly. It was enough to tell her that this was not a dead-end. The mechanism that moved the stone was on the opposite side.

She turned to retrace her steps

and stood with pounding heart as she saw two luminous red dots at the end of the corridor she just had traversed. She switched off her flashlight until the solution occurred to her. Switching the light on again, she headed for the two ruby-colored lights.

Carefully avoiding the trigger mechanism beneath, Frances stood on tiptoe and peered through the bits of colored glass that had startled her. Her bedroom was plainly visible.

It was anticlimactic when she finally stepped through the panel, lowered it into place and examined the thick, ruby-tinted glass eyes of the figure carved into the wood panel.

## VI

DINNER THAT NIGHT was a gay, festive affair. An outsider never would have guessed that death was stalking one of the celebrants who gathered under the ancient mahogany beams of the castle's refectory.

Formal garb was a must on Saturday nights at the castle. The ladies were sartorially subdued compared to the men. Von Mott and Di Malo were peacocks. The former's purple cummerbund peeped through the lapels of a wine-colored dinner-jacket. His trousers were a comparatively tame shade of red.

Di Malo's plaid dinner-jacket was a Joseph's coat of many colors. A yellow cummerbund and trousers in a deeper shade of the same color gave him the appearance of a chorus-boy in 'The Merry Widow'.

Even Dr. Worthington was a bird of bright plumage in his powder-blue dinner-jacket, striped tie and cobalt blue cummerbund.

Their hostess was elegant in a low-cut black gown that did wonders for her full-blown figure. Marian's evening dress was almost a duplicate of her mother's. The difference was from the bodice up. Sheila wore a triple strand of dazzling pearls around her throat. Marian's neck was bare.

Frances felt mousy in her severely tailored white gown and modest single-strand of small pearls. But the eyes of the men at the table gave the lie to her feelings.

The redhead was admiring the ebony sheen of Sheila's hair and thinking how youthful it seemed, until she scrutinized the black locks more closely and saw that

Mrs. Madden was wearing a cleverly-fashioned wig.

Sheila caught her eye and smiled. "Yes, darling, it's a phoney," she said. "I've got a half dozen of them. They cost me a small fortune, but they save time and money in the long run. I haven't time to dash to the hairdresser's every time I take a dip in the swimming pool and the prices these robbers charge are outlandish."

Marian said, "It isn't as though mother's natural hair needed covering. Actually, it's a lot more attractive than her wigs."

"Thank you, darling," said Mrs. Madden. "I really feel that I am very much a la mode. Wigs have become quite a fad in the smart set."

Von Mott said unctuously, "I have been trying to persuade Sheila to throw her wigs away. Her own hair is so much more beautiful than those silly things."

The object of these remarks bridled like a spinster after her first kiss. "How sweet of you to say so, Eric, my dear. You should know, of course. You have seen my real hair under rather disheveled conditions."

Von Mott blushed a fiery red at the general laughter that followed the remark. He shot Frances a grateful glance when she guided the conversation into a discussion on the merits and mistakes of America's international diplomacy.

The watchful Frances noticed that Mrs. Madden ate sparingly, but partook freely of the vintage champagne served at the table. Her admiration for her hostess's histrionic powers increased by the moment as the doughty lady bandied bon mots with her guests and enacted the role of carefree granddame to perfection.

She studied the faces around the table. The three men either were consummate actors or hadn't a care in the world. The only troubled eyes were Marian's. Frances gave her friend a reassuring smile when their gaze met.

Sheila waited until the men had drifted to the library for brandy and cigars and the three women had been served their liqueurs in the drawingroom before referring to the subject uppermost in her mind.

Drawing the two younger women to the sofa, beside her, she said, "Suddenly, I'm afraid. I wonder if you two children would mind sleeping in the spare bedroom of my suite tonight?"

"I have a much better idea," said Frances Ivy peering carefully around the room. "I'll stay in your suite. You and Marian bunk in her quarters. I have a plan that may flush out the culprit. It demands the strictest secrecy. Neither your guests nor the staff must know of the switch in sleeping accomodations."

Frances touched Mrs. Madden's

knee. "Listen carefully, dear. After the men join us, I want you to phone your attorney and instruct him to drive out in the morning, to help you make an important change in your will. Ring for Andrews and ask him to put through the call. Tell Andrews you will take the call in there."

Frances gestured toward the nearby alcove. "The phone there is well within earshot. Talk as loudly as possible. Our little act should alert the entire household. Andrews will listen in and spread the news of your change-of-will via the servants' grapevine. If my guess is right there will be another murder attempt tonight."

She glanced quickly toward the library door, then went on: "For the rest of the plan. I noticed a balcony outside your master-bedroom. It would be easy for anyone to gain access to your quarters by making use of it, even if the flimsy french doors in your bedroom were locked. Ask your maid to leave the doors open. That way, an intruder could climb the stone staircase that leads to your balcony from the lower terraces and walk right in.

"When Mimi finishes her nightly chores and goes to her quarters in the servants' wing, turn out all the lights, slip out of your door into the hall and then into Marian's suite. Be sure to leave your door unlocked. As soon as you are in Marian's rooms, ring me on the phone. Don't say a word. Wait until the phone rings once, then hang up. I'll come up to your place, at once."

Frances made another optical survey of the library door. "One thing I must stress. Don't either of you try to contact me in person or by telephone during the night. It would nullify my entire plan. I'll call you in the morning."

Marian looked distressed. "I think we three should spend the night together, as mother suggested," she said. "I don't want you killed by mistake any more than I want mother murdered."

Frances Ivy said, "No one is going to kill me. I'm going to pull up a chair and sit where I can watch the door and the entire balcony, with my gun in hand and flashlight at the ready."

Mrs. Madden made a protesting sound.

"Don't worry, Sheila," Frances said. "The chances are that I won't have to do more than rough up the intruder and disarm him—or her. If I have to use my pistol, the target won't suffer more than a flesh-wound. I'm a crack shot. I'll leave enough for the psychiatrists or the warden of the penitentiary to work on."

Marian made a *shushing* sound as the three men came through the door at the opposite end of the drawingroom.

"Okay," whispered Frances Ivy. "Let's proceed according to plan."

The preliminaries went off like clockwork. Andrews was summoned and given his instructions. There was a wait of a few minutes before the call came through. Sheila excused herself and disappeared into the alcove.

Frances's eyes swept the group as their hostess's strident voice rang out. She saw Di Malo give a nervous start at mention of the will. Von Mott's face was its usual blank mask. He continued his dissertation on the advantage of breeding trotters instead of race horses.

Dr. Worthington's eyes met hers. He shrugged expressively and winked. "Here we go again," he said. "I wonder if it's an addition to or subtraction from Sheila's will, this time." The gray-haired medico laughed aloud as the group turned a collectively blank face toward him.

"Knock it off," he said inelegantly. "Let's not pretend that we all haven't been eavesdropping. Sheila wanted us to get the message or she wouldn't have talked about her will where everyone could hear her."

Von Mott stopped in mid-sentence and glared. "I think your remarks are in extremely bad taste, Herr Doctor," he said. "A gentleman does not eavesdrop."

Mrs. Madden's return to the room set off a sporadic flurry of chatter on generalities of the day. Everyone looked relieved when Sheila yawned openly and said she was turning in.

## VII

FRANCES IVY waited an hour and a half for Sheila's call before picking up the receiver and dialing her hostess's number. She got a busy signal. She waited fifteen minutes and dialed again. The phone was still busy. As she replaced the receiver there was a soft tap at the door.

It was Marian. She waited until she had closed the door behind her.

"I thought I'd better come over and tell you that mother probably has loused up the entire act," she said. "I heard Mimi leave almost an hour ago. Mother's been on the phone ever since. My guess is that she's been drooling to one or both of her boy-friends. I could hear her voice but couldn't distinguish what she was saying, through the dumbwaiter shaft. I think we'd better call the whole thing off."

"No, I'm sure Sheila won't divulge our plans. Let's go back to your rooms and wait for her. She'll be along pretty soon. I imagine it's routine for her to chat with her houseguests before retiring. It probably would arouse suspicion if she didn't."

The pair waited another half hour in Marian's suite before Sheila slipped in the door.

"I hope you'll forgive me for

being so tardy," she said, "but I just *had* to talk with Eric." She simpered. "We had a date for later tonight. I had to tell the dear boy I couldn't make it. He was *so* insistent. It took a long time to soothe his little hurt feelings."

"I'm going to assume that you did not discuss our plans with Eric," Frances Ivy said.

The simper disappeared from Mrs. Madden's face. She gazed at the redhead reproachfully. "Of course not, darling. You can depend on that."

Frances nodded approval. "We'll proceed as planned."

She dropped a flashlight into a pocket of the knee-length housecoat that covered her shorts and halter. Her revolver went into the other pocket.

"See you in the morning," she said. "Don't forget what I said about not telephoning me. Get a good night's rest. There's nothing to worry about. Lock yourself in," she whispered as she opened the door.

A soft light from the night's half-moon made reconnaissance easy. After Frances Ivy padlocked the door behind her she took two heavily padded bolsters from a bed in Sheila's spare room, placed them in her hostess's oversized bed and bunched the covers around them.

Choosing the most comfortable looking of the master bedroom's four chairs, she moved it well out into the room, facing the French doors and the balcony. After wrapping her short housecoat around another bolster she propped up the finished product and began rummaging in Sheila's dressing-room.

A moment later, she was carefully placing one of Sheila's wigs atop the bolstered housecoat. She tiptoed over to the bed and linked another of her hostess's wigs with the realistically huddled bolsters.

Next step was to tiptoe over to the secret panel she had discovered during her examination of Sheila's suite. She had thought it best to keep the discovery to herself, for security reasons.

She poked a finger behind the panel carving. The panel rose and she stepped into a cavernous corridor similar to the dead-end passageway she had explored from the bedroom of her suite.

Frances Ivy stifled a chuckle as she saw a set of red eyes blinking through the dark and two tiny shafts of rosy light bisecting the hall, about midway to the ruby eyes. Apparently Sheila's boy-friends were spending a restless night.

Using her flashlight intermittently to avoid possible pitfalls, she edged her way down to the first set of tiny lights. Through the glass eyes it was easy to see Von Mott in a red dressing-gown, sitting with his slippered feet propped up on a stool, apparently im-

mersed in a bulky leather-bound volume.

The next set of ruby optics revealed Di Malo in bed, puffing away at a cigarette and poring through the pages of a magazine. Judging from what showed above the bed's coverlet, he was unclad.

A spurt of her flashlight showed that she was standing in the center of a triangle that branched off right and left into adjoining corridors, with the passageway she just had traversed forming the third.

She chose the left and soon found herself facing a blank stone wall for the second time that day. Playing the bright ray on the floor beneath the wall she saw a familiar looking metal insert in the stone. She stepped on it. The stone barrier moved upward.

The redhead wasn't surprised to see another pair of ruby eyes facing her in the distance. She had purposely left the lights on in her suite. She made sure that her guess was correct by peering into her bedroom through the colored glass slits before retracing her steps to the switch on the opposite side of the stone barrier and triggering it shut again.

Back at the triangle, Frances followed the ray of her flashlight down the third of the corridors to a set of stone steps. Descending the steps carefully, she reached the ground floor and saw a tunnel ahead. A moment later she was peering through another set of glass eyes set in a wood panel. The faint moonlight revealed the interior of an outdoor pavilion. She stepped on the metal plate at her feet. The panel lifted and she heard the sound of running water.

Satisfied with her reconnoitering, Frances wended her way back through the chill halls to Sheila's bedroom. She closed the panel in the wall, walked across the bedroom into the adjoining living-room and made herself comfortable behind a chair that commanded an unobstructed view of Sheila's bed and the chair she had so carefully dressed up before starting her tour.

Frances congratulated herself on an educated guess an hour later when the glass eyes in the bedroom panel glowed brightly for a moment, then darkened. Through eyes that had become accustomed to the dark, she saw the panel rise slowly and the outlines of a head and shoulders appear.

She steeled her nerves and took a firm grip on the revolver she held in her hand. A bright spurt of flame and a popping sound emanated from the open panel. The figure in the aperture fired three more times in quick succession at the propped up counterpane in the chair. The skillfully arranged bundle fell to the floor.

Frances waited until a shadowy leg appeared over the bottom edge of the panel before taking careful aim. The silencer on her pistol

made the same popping noise as that of the gun fired by the intruder.

There was a cry of pain, a hoarse masculine oath and the figure vanished. The redhead waited until the panel had descended before re-entering Sheila's bedroom. Her flashlight showed splatters of blood on the baseboard beneath the secret entrance.

Frances Ivy counted off a generous five minutes more before opening the panel and peering cautiously through into the corridor. The blackness was complete. Even the tiny shafts of light from the rooms she had examined, had disappeared.

She switched on her flashlight, played it boldly down the corridor and gave a sigh of satisfaction. A trail of blood was visible on the stone floor.

She followed the trail down the corridor.

In less than an hour, Frances was back in her hostess's bedroom. She closed the French doors, stretched out comfortably on Sheila's luxurious bed and, almost instantly, fell asleep.

## VIII

FRANCES IVY awakened to the shrill summons of the telephone. She picked up one of the two instruments beside her bed, emitted a sleepy 'hello', and heard nothing but a buzz. She cradled the receiver and reached for the other phone.

Marian's voice greeted her. "I know we promised not to call, but mother simply insisted. Did anything happen? We're sitting here in a tizzy. Mother's been pacing the floor, most of the night. If I hadn't stopped her she would have been over there hours ago."

The reclining redhead looked at the wrist-watch she had worn to bed. The hour was six o'clock.

"Give me time to take a quick shower, then come on over," she said. "Be a good girl, Marian, and order crisp bacon, coddled eggs, whole wheat toast and tea with milk for me. I hope your mother

won't mind if we share an early breakfast with her, in her suite."

A short time later, the three sat around a small portable table in the living-room. Sheila was toying with her favorite eggs-benedict. Marian was doing justice to a generous helping of ham and scrambled eggs and Frances was doing ditto to her breakfast.

Mrs. Madden waited for a while before touching her lips daintily with a lace napkin. "Frances, I can't stand it a moment longer," she said. "Please tell us if anything happened last night."

The redhead rose from the table. "Come into the bedroom, kiddies."

She led them to the chair she had carefully arranged the night before and held up the bullet-perforated housecoat and the bolster with its corresponding holes.

Marian paled. Her mother's eyes were incredulous. "My coat was wrapped around the bolster," Frances said. "I had it propped up in the chair. It looked real enough by moonlight to fool my visitor."

She probed around a hole in the chair's upholstery with a deft finger, before holding up a small misshapen bit of lead. "This is one of the spent bullets," she said casually.

Marian's gasp sounded like a surfacing seal. Her mother stared with glassy eyes and sat down abruptly in the nearest chair.

The daughter was the first to find her voice. "Could you see who it was?"

Frances Ivy's voice was noncommittal. She might have been discussing the weather. "Perhaps I did. Sheila and I will tell you later."

She walked over to her friend, patted her cheek and piloted Marian toward the door. "Honey, if you don't mind, I think Sheila should hear the details alone," she said. "After all, I did promise to shield the attacker as much as possible. Sheila can tell you as much as she thinks best after we've had a little talk."

As the door closed behind Marian, Mrs. Madden said, "That was thoughtful of you, Frances. Marian is such a worrier. We can give her a watered-down version after our talk."

She took a deep breath. "I must say, I am dying to know what happened in this room. I gather that your assailant escaped. If you recognized the person, I know you'll keep your promise about allowing me to have the poor thing hospitalized instead of arrested."

Sheila looked at Frances expectantly. "Come now, dear," she said finally. "Don't keep me in suspense any longer. I can't bear it. I must know who has been trying to kill me."

The redhead walked across the room and stood over Mrs. Madden's chair. There was an edge of steel to her soft voice.

"No one tried to kill you, Sheila, as you are well aware," she said. "Your hired assassin knew I was spending the night in your suite and was sure I would be in that chair, facing the balcony, after you tipped him off. It must have been quite a shock to you when I answered Marian's phone call. I'm sure you thought I'd be very dead this morning."

Mrs. Madden's features stiffened into a controlled mask. "Have you lost your mind, child? Last night's experience must have been too much for you. Why, in heaven's name, would I try to have you killed, after hiring you to protect me?"

Frances stared at her for a moment, then grasped Sheila's chair firmly and with a surprising display of strength, turned it around so that it faced the wall with the secret panel. She touched the seated figure and pointed to the blood-spattered baseboard, before walking over and pressing the hidden switch in the elaborately carved woodwork.

The panel halted its upward progress. The redhead studied her hostess's features. She had to admire her iron control. The handsome face displayed not the slightest sign of surprise or emotion.

Frances Ivy said slowly and distinctly. "Your gatekeeper did not get away, Sheila. That's Hans Rudolf's blood you see there. I shot a piece of his foot off. He decided to talk when I threatened to turn him over to the police."

"Do you actually expect me to believe such a cock and bull story?" said the seated dowager. "What possible reason would I have for hiring my gatekeeper to kill you?"

"You know the answer to that question better than I. When Marian sent for a trained investigator, you knew your scheme to murder her and keep the castle, complete to your easily accessible boy-friends—plus Marian's half of a sixty-five million dollar income—had virtually no chance of succeeding. You had to get me bumped off."

"What vicious nonsense!" Mrs. Madden exclaimed. "There's only one possible reason for your contemptible accusations. You are trying to blackmail me." She rose from her chair and gestured haughtily toward the door. "Get out of my house before I call the police."

Frances Bascomb Ivy looked at the gesturing woman as though studying a rare species of insect.

"You really are stupid," she said. "Your entire scheme proves it. The arsenic bit would have been enough to divert suspicion from you. After very conveniently having Dr. Worthington in the castle to give you first-aid, all you had to do was follow up your small dose of self-inflicted poison by giving Marian a lethal dose. There

would have been virtually no chance of your being accused of her death.

"The second red herring, the plunging elevator, was not only superfluous, but it placed you at the mercy of an unscrupulous confederate. It also frightened Marian into sending for me, which she never would have done if you hadn't tossed in that melodramatic bit of nonsense."

Frances stopped and scanned Mrs. Madden's wooden-like features. "I must give you credit for fast thinking, wearing the duplicate to Marian's bikini. You figured that everyone would think she had been killed by mistake when Hans Rudolf pushed that gargoyle off of the tower."

"Now I know you are trying to trick me," said Sheila Madden contemptuously. "You are well aware that Hans didn't push that marble figure off of the tower. He was down at the drawbridge letting you into the estate when the gargoyle fell."

"That also was a clever touch, even though wasted," Frances said. "By routing me up the long, winding service lane you gave Hans plenty of time to get to the tower and do his dirty work, before I drove to the castle."

She made an impatient movement. "I'm getting a little bored with your histrionics, Sheila. You don't think I would waste time accusing you of attempted homicide if I didn't have unassailable evidence, do you?"

Walking to the divan, she picked up the revolver that rested there. Facing her hostess again, she shoved the gun under Mrs. Madden's nose.

"Don't try to tell me you don't recognize the weapon Hans fired at me last night. This special silencer should identify it for you. I took this away from Hans when I cornered him in his cottage. I don't have to tell you that it is registered in your name. Your hired killer showed me the registry receipt and the application, with your signature on it."

Frances decided to take a shot in the dark. "Hans even preserved your fingerprints on the pistol. And he took care not to use it without wearing gloves."

Pausing for a moment to allow the words to register, Frances continued. "How could you have been so incredibly vicious as to plan the murder of your own daughter? Even more incredible, how could you have been stupid enough to hire that moronic gatekeeper to do your killing? You idiot! Hans Rudolf will blackmail you for the rest of your life."

Mrs. Madden's iron composure cracked. She stood on trembling legs for a moment, then fell, rather than sat in the chair she had just vacated. "That hairy beast," she said bitterly. "He was planning to frame me all along, if anything

went wrong. After all I've done for him. The ungrateful swine!"

Frances Ivy looked down at her hostess with an expression of loathing on her face.

"You really are a creep, Sheila. Not one word of remorse for the unnatural crime you tried to commit, just self-pity because the plan went wrong."

Mrs. Madden sat up abruptly, a fierce defiance flaming in her eyes. Frances was startled at the change in her, as a torrent of words poured forth.

"I've hated that mealy-mouthed brat since she was old enough to talk. If Marian hadn't undermined my influence with my husband, I would have had his entire fortune to do with as I saw fit."

She shook with rage. "The crowning stab in the back was when she talked John Madden into bequeathing the castle to her. The arrogance of that creature! Imagine anyone telling me that I can't have houseguests of my own choosing. I've never stopped cursing the day my husband adopted Marian."

Anger distorted her features. "You didn't know that Marian was adopted, did you? Neither does she. The crazy part of it is that she resembles me. And, that's another story. I've suspected for some time that she's my sister Marian's child. I knew that my sister and John had a torrid love affair before she died in an automobile accident, and he married me.

"There were a lot of unsavory rumors that Marian had given birth to a child out of wedlock. I should have suspected the truth when my husband suggested we name the child after my sister, but I didn't until years later, when he began to lavish expensive gifts on my sister's namesake."

The dowager tightened her lips and regained a semblance of composure with a visible effort. "So, what good will any of this do you?" she said through clenched teeth. "No jury will ever convict me of attempted homicide on your word and the word of an employee of mine."

Frances looked at the contorted face with open distaste. "I want you to listen to me carefully," she said. "First of all, if you have even a particle of sense in that microbe-ridden brain of yours, you will never tell Marian she is not your natural daughter. I won't appeal to your decency, because you have none. But I will appeal to your cupidity. I'm sure you know that Marian will do far more for you in a monetary way, if she continues to think that you are her natural mother."

She paused. "The rest of what I have to say could mean the difference between life and death to you. Neither Hans nor I are going to testify against you in court. I have no intention of bringing an

action against you for just one reason. I would go to almost any lengths to keep Marian from learning that the woman she thinks of as her mother tried to kill her. I just want you to remember one thing. I've got enough on you and Hans to put you both in the hot-seat if Marian should die before you do."

The redhead jerked her thumb peremptorily toward the door. "Now, let's get out of here and tell Marian about your noble plans to rehabilitate your mentally-disturbed gatekeeper. But get this through your head. You'd better spend a couple of hours a day for the rest of your life, on bended knees, praying that Marian outlives you. If anything happens to your adopted daughter you can depend on one thing. I'll pin her death on you."

Early the next morning, it took a strong effort of will, but Frances Bascomb Ivy managed to deliver a polite kiss to her hostess's ashen cheek before she followed the butler out of the castle, with Marian in her wake. She submitted to a bone-cracking embrace and kissed her friend affectionately as Andrews stowed the bags away in her sportscar.

"As I told Sheila," Frances said, "I don't have the heart to idle my time away here when my office calendar is crowded with work assignments. But I'll be here without fail for your wedding."

Marian beamed at her admiringly. "You really are a genius in your field. It never occurred to me that Hans was the nut who was trying to kill mother. I always had the impression that he was the one person in her employ who was genuinely fond of her."

The tall brunette draped herself over the door as the redhead slipped her car into gear. "I'm glad you persuaded mother to tear up her will in front of all of her legatees. Now, she can stop worrying about some one else in her menage going berserk, the way Hans did."

"Yes," said Frances Ivy with a smile. "Sheila can concentrate on her favorite amusement now, without worrying about anything but money."

Marian Madden sighed happily. "I know it sounds silly," she said, "but, in a way, I'm glad all this happened. I never would have known what a heart of gold mother has, under that manhandling, money-pinching exterior. That was a wonderful thing she did, calling father's executor and arranging a pension and psychiatric care for the man who tried to murder her."

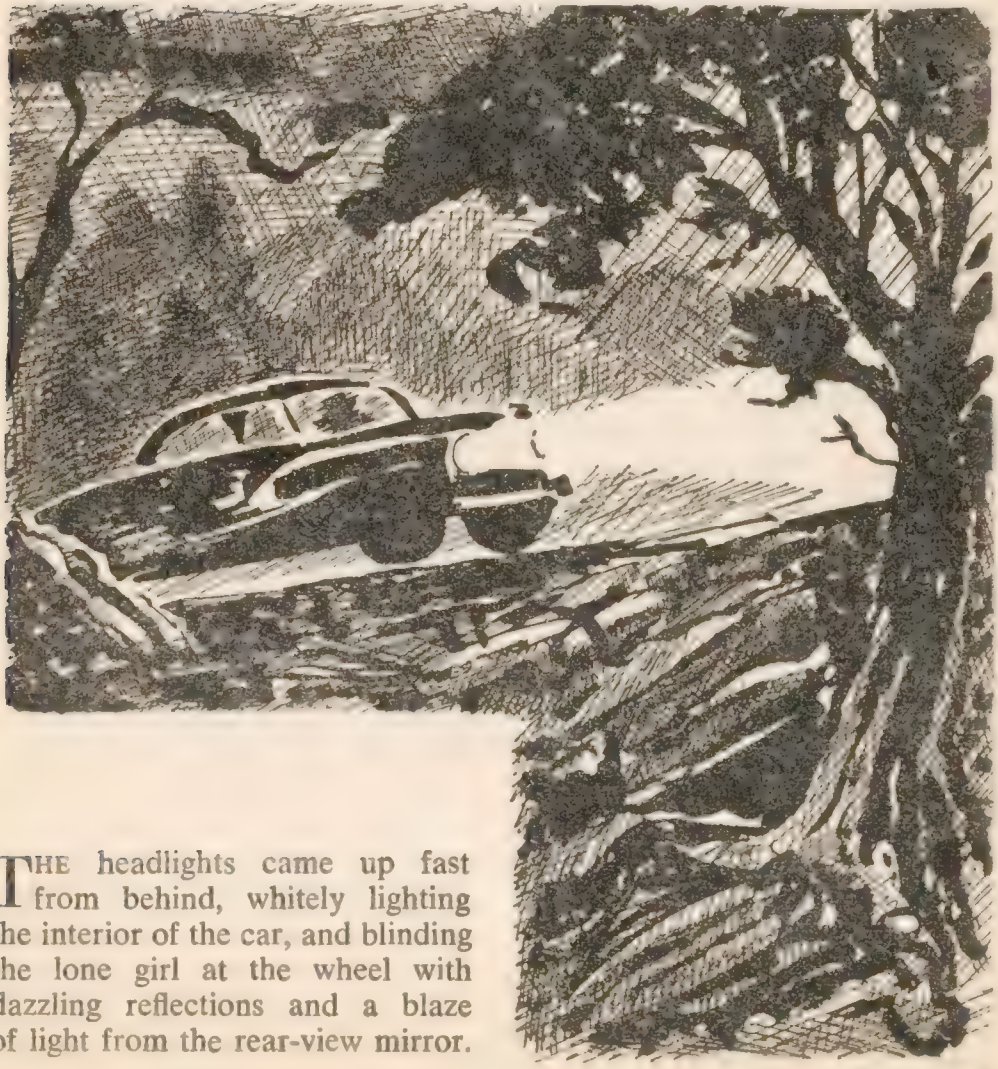
She chuckled. "Mother's natural instincts may cause her to regret her warm-heartedness some day. I suspect that brute will be a drain on her bankroll for a long time."

Frances Ivy patted the hand on the door. "You can bank on that," she said, before setting the car in motion.

# The Highway Maniac

*Lawlessness rode the highway . . .*
*and a sheriff's job was at stake.*

**by CHRISTOPHER ANVIL**



THE headlights came up fast from behind, whitely lighting the interior of the car, and blinding the lone girl at the wheel with dazzling reflections and a blaze of light from the rear-view mirror.

The glare lit her hair like a cap of gold, and outlined her features as if chiseled in marble. It struck her eyes with a lancing pain that forced them shut and squeezed out two glittering tears. Her lips drew back slightly over her clenched teeth, and she gripped the wheel with a spasmodic contraction of her fingers. The car slowed and she guided it to the side of the road.

There was a roar as the other car shot past, and a thin shriek of metal as her own fender momentarily touched the guard rail. Then her car slammed to a stop. The girl pressed her hands to her eyes, and sat motionless for a moment, aware only of the fading afterimages and the quiet throb of the engine. After a moment her right hand felt the newspaper lying on the seat beside her, where the glow of the instrument panel lit the glaring black headlines.

She had read them before, but now they seemed to leap at her out of the page: HIGHWAY MADMAN RUNS WILD! — ROCKLAND SHERIFF HELPLESS.

She pressed her hand against her forehead, felt the new engagement ring on her left hand, and opened her eyes.

Far down the wide blacktopped road ahead, a pair of red tail-lights dwindled around a curve and vanished in the night.

She glanced up and down the dark highway, then pulled the wheel around and pressed the gas pedal. Her car spun across the road in a scream of tires and she shot back the way she had come.

AT THE filling station where the Rockland Turnpike joined the highway in a T-shaped intersection, Martin Darrell, twenty-four years old and sheriff, stood beside the white car with its big gold sheriff's star on the side, and listened to the gurgle as the tank filled.

The man at the gas pump raised his head to glance at Darrell shrewdly. "Tough luck," he said. Too bad, Marty."

Darrell rested a large hand on the car's fender, and frowned. A month ago, Jack Webber had called him "Sheriff." Now, with the election less than a week away, Webber called him "Marty."

Webber glanced up again. "What you figure to do after the election?"

Darrell glanced around at the dark hills. To the north were the shut-down coal mines. All around were small farms that barely made enough to live on. Off to the west and south were fair-sized forests, where a few men with bulldozers and power saws handled all the work there was.

Webber cleared his throat. "Thought about it, have you?"

Darrell studied him coldly. Webber liked Anne, who was Darrell's girl, so naturally he and Darrell weren't the best of friends. But Darrell passed this station every

night, driving out from Rockland Center to patrol the highway where the trouble usually took place, so this was the best station to stop at for gas. However, there were others. He didn't answer, but watched Webber coldly.

Webber looked up briefly, and his eyes slid away from Darrell's steady gaze. "I just wondered, Mart. It's hard to keep a wife without a job."

Darrell winced, despite himself. What would he do if he lost the election? Rockland County wasn't known for turning out scholars, and Darrell was no exception. He was skilled with gun, axe, and plow, and he'd worked in the mines summers, before they'd closed down. But with rare exceptions, the jobs now went to the best-educated, and Darrell had never seen the inside of a college.

Webber shut off the gas, and hooked the hose back on the pump. He bent to screw the gas cap in place. "They say the army gives good pay," he said.

Darrell shook his head. "Anne doesn't want to leave her mother."

Webber nodded, made no comment, and glanced at the pump. "Three-sixty, Marty." He made change for the crumpled five-dollar bill Darrell gave him. "Too bad, this fellow Hover's running against you."

Darrell glanced at the poster nailed to a nearby telephone pole. It had a large photograph, and the message: *Hover:—the MAN for Sheriff.*

"It's not that," said Darrell, watching Webber. "It's this madman, driving people off the road. With that strike downstate, and the rioting, the state police are tied up. I ought to be able to stop him, but no matter what I do he's always in the opposite end of the county. It doesn't make sense." Darrell slid into his car and shut the door.

Webber leaned down to the window, and with a faint tremor in his voice, said, "What's your granddad say?"

Old Brian Darrell recently retired, had been sheriff for almost fifty years, and it was said that his mere reputation scared more crooks than a dozen radio cars full of deputies. This was fortunate, because the county was so poor that its sheriff had almost a one-man job.

Darrell hesitated, reminded that he had been elected because of his name. Then he shrugged. "Granddad says it's obvious. Why?"

Webber uneasily straightened up. "Well, we had him for sheriff so long. What does he think?"

"I don't know," said Darrell shortly. Granddad's name had elected him the first time, but Darrell intended to do the job himself, and win the second election on his own, or die trying. He said, "It's my job now."

A smile stretched Webber's lips briefly. "That's right, Marty. That's

the way to look at it." He turned away. "So long, Marty."

Darrell said good night, and pulled out onto the highway. He had the exasperated feeling of groping around in the dark, when he was sure his grandfather would have had this so-called maniac cooling in the county jail a week ago. And yet, he told himself, he was as strong, as hard-working, and generally as capable as his grandfather had been at his age. What was missing? Frowning, he remembered the old man's advice.

"First off," the elder Darrell had said, "remember you're the people's sheriff. Not their boss and not their servant, but their sheriff. You're not the law, but you got to back up the law, and risk your neck backing it up if it comes to that. But once a man gets onto the right side of the law, then you're both on the same side. And next, when somebody's broke the law pretty bad and got away with it, you have to get him. You've got to figure who stood to gain by what happened. You've got to notice anything—anything at all—that's unusual.

"Once you get hold of a loose end, maybe you can unravel the whole thing. You've got to know people. And without letting them see it, you've got to kind of watch how they act around you. It takes more than a gun and a badge, but you know that. The thing is, it takes more than hard work and being brave too. You've got to know how to think, and how to feel out the lay of the land."

Darrell's train of thought was broken by the lights of a car approaching on the opposite side of the road. He recognized Anne's car, saw her pull to the side, glanced in his mirror, tapped the brake, then swung in a tight U-turn to park behind her. He jumped out, looked in her window, and grinned.

"Thanks to that strike downstate the troopers can't catch you speeding. But I can."

"Marty," said the girl, her blonde hair shimmering in his headlight beams, "I was just run off the road."

Darrell stiffened as if he'd been slapped. "Where?"

"Just past the bridge over Parker's Creek."

His first impulse was to jump in the car and race off down the highway. Instead, he stood perfectly still.

The girl said, "Oh, Marty, if this goes on, you'll lose the election!"

He straightened up. "I know."

"But if that happens, we can't

get married. I can't leave Mother, sick as she is. And there just are no jobs for a man here any more!"

He drew in a deep breath.

She said anxiously, "What are you going to do?"

Darrell thought of his grandfather's advice, and stood for a long silent moment, frowning. Then, carefully, he thought of the things Granddad had told him to think of.

The idea, when it came, came with the suddenness of a bolt of lightning flashing across the sky. He didn't realize that he'd spoken, but Anne said, "What is it, Marty?"

"What Granddad told me. Figure who stands to gain by what happens."

"How does that help when you're dealing with a madman? Nobody gains!"

"Madman?" said Darrell angrily. "Who says he's a madman?"

"But, Marty," she said, "who does gain? Who profits by driving people off the road? Not hurting them, not robbing them—just scaring them half to death! Who gets anything out of that?"

Darrell felt the butt of his big .45 revolver. "Jack Webber gets something out of it. He likes you. He'd be happy to break us up."

"But Marty, he's at his gas staton when it happens!"

Darrell smiled. "Well, you know just as much as I do about it, Anne. And if you'll think what Granddad said, you'll know who this 'maniac' has got to be. What I want to know is, do you want to help me catch him?"

She looked at him, her face wondering. Then she nodded.

Two nights later, Anne was at the wheel, in the other end of the county, on the road so few people traveled now after dark, when the headlights moved up fast from behind, blinding her with dazzling reflections and a blaze of light from the rear-view mirror.

She clenched her teeth, and guided the car toward the side of the road.

The glare grew until it filled the car with light.

"Now, Marty," she said, "he's close!"

Darrell swung up the long narrow mirror that almost filled the rear window. The inside of Anne's car darkened as the mirror threw the headlight beams back in the eyes of the other driver.

There was a tortured scream of brakes.

Both cars slammed to a sudden stop, the drivers momentarily blinded.

Darrell was out the door in one swift motion.

The big revolver jumped in his hand, and the sound of the shot reverberated between the hills beside the road. The other car settled as a front tire went flat.

Darrell raised the gun. Was it a madman? Or was Grandad's advice good?

He reached out and wrenched back the door handle.

"Out. And your hands high!" he ordered.

The door flew open, and a scarecrow figure sprang out, eyes squeezed shut and hands high overhead.

"I give up, Sheriff! Don't shoot!"

Darrell looked at the familiar face, and grinned. "That's one way to get elected, Hover. But I don't think the voters will go for it."

Hover said shamefacedly, "I needed the money, so I tried to get the job."

"You waited till Webber called you?"

Hover nodded. "You always went past his garage, so he could tell me which end of the county you were headed for. Tonight he said you went the other way."

"I did. Then parked the car up a side road and came back with Anne." He handcuffed his prisoner, and prodded him back down the road. The possibilities the future opened before him left Darrell dazzled.

Like his grandfather had said, it had been simple.

But first, a man had to think.

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Some of Next Month's Headliners

**THE SPY WHO WAS MIKE SHAYNE by BRETT HALLIDAY**

*The New Mike Shayne Thriller*

**THE TERRIBLE FOOTSTEPS by T. C. McCLARY**

*A New Shocking Suspense Novelet*

**A LIST OF SEVEN by ROBERT W. ALEXANDER**

**THE PICKUP MAN by JACK RITCHIE**

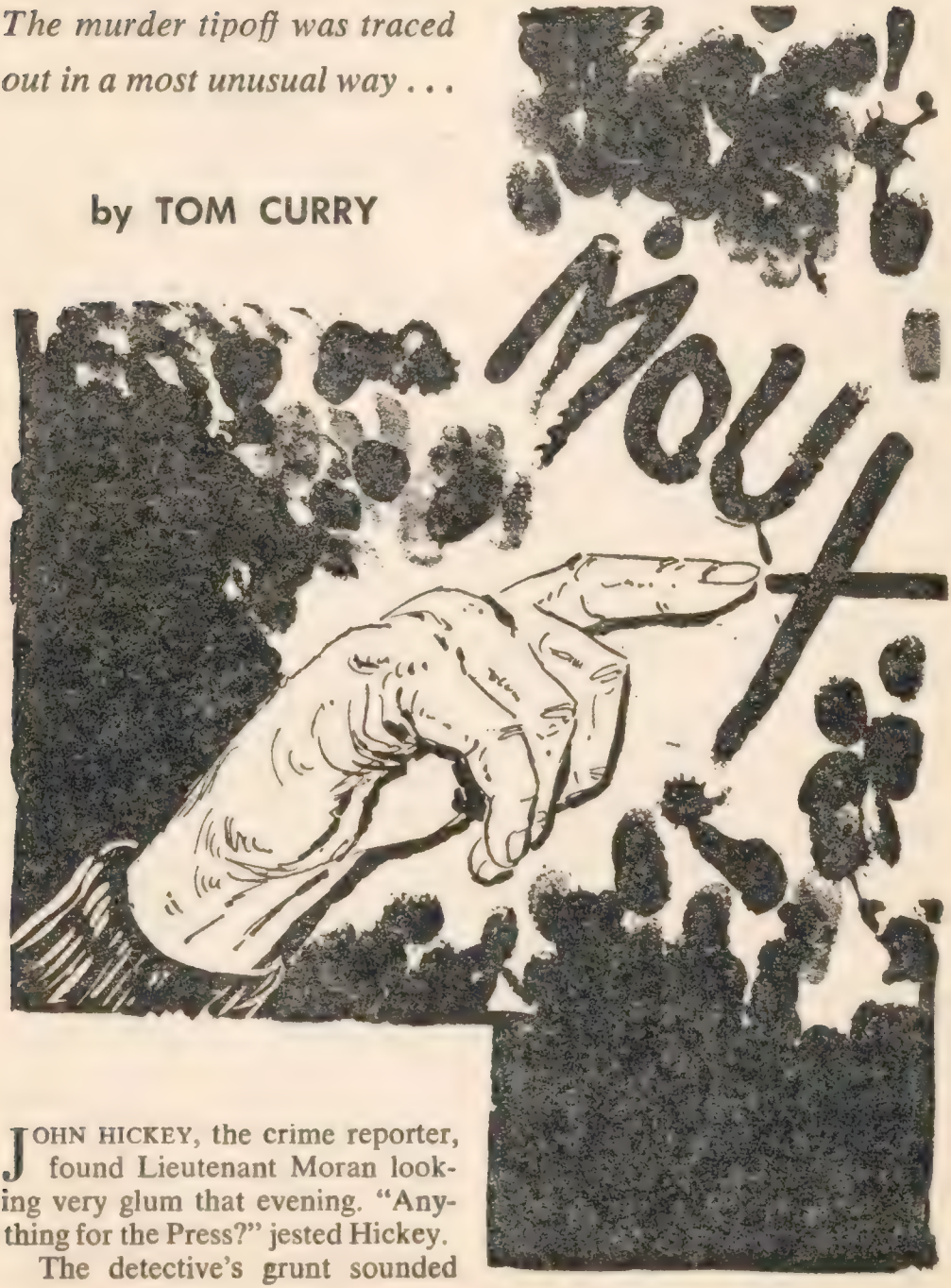
**FEBRUARY ICE by HAL ELLSON**

**TOO MUCH ALIBI by PETER KENNEDY**

# WRITTEN IN BLOOD

*The murder tipoff was traced out in a most unusual way . . .*

by TOM CURRY




JOHN HICKEY, the crime reporter, found Lieutenant Moran looking very glum that evening. "Anything for the Press?" jested Hickey.

The detective's grunt sounded

profane. Snatching the phone from his desk in the squad room on the second floor of the precinct station, he dialed rapidly and without consulting a list. It was obviously a number he knew well.

Hickey, perched on the desk edge, could hear the ringing at the other end of the line. Moran let it ring nine times.

Finally he exclaimed under his breath, and gave up. He tossed his smoldering cigar butt into a tray, and leapt to his feet. "Come on," he snapped. "Ride along if you like."

Hickey trailed the burly veteran, an ace sleuth in Manhattan's busiest precinct. They clumped downstairs, past the desk, presided over by a uniformed lieutenant. Moran waved a hand and the desk officer nodded. Then Moran and Hickey were on the sidewalk, a green light at either side of the stoop.

Down the line was a squad car. Hickey sat at Moran's side and they headed west toward the Hudson.

The car pulled up in a side street, a slum neighborhood not far from the waterfront. Moran touched a pocket and Hickey knew he was checking to make sure his revolver was there.

"Wait in the car for me," said Moran.

The burly detective could move with surprising speed. He was out, and up the sidewalk several doors so fast that Hickey had barely time to rip open a package of cigarettes before Moran disappeared into a poorly lighted entry.

Within a few minutes, Moran was back. He slipped behind the wheel and picked up his phone. "Send everything—it's murder," he said. He gave the address, and hung up.

"Come upstairs with me," he told Hickey.

Moran led the reporter into a noisome tenement. The stairs creaked as they ascended but there was nobody in sight. On the third floor, Moran moved down the dark hall, and opened a rickety door.

"Take a good look. But don't touch anything," he said.

The dead man lay on his side, his knees drawn up. One hand was stretched toward a telephone as though he had been reaching for it an instant before death had caught up with him.

The receiver was off, hanging over the table edge. But it was a dial phone, and the base was still on the table.

He was clad in a blue shirt, and worn trousers. One shoe was still on, but its mate had been wrenched off, and lay nearby.

"Who is it?" asked Hickey.

"Ollie Philman, my top informer."

As Hickey knew, an 'informer' was a polite name for a stool pigeon. A detective such as Moran

would be allotted a fund from which to pay for tips sifted from the underworld by picked spies.

The room was poorly furnished. There was a single bed, a couple of worn chairs, a gas hot-plate, with the table in the center.

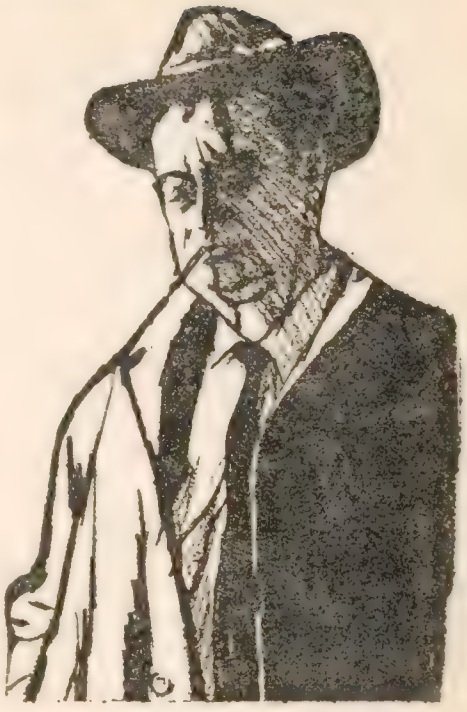
"Yeah, Ollie was my best stoolie," Moran said. "His phone just rang and rang all evening. We pay for it so he could contact me, without having to show himself at the station."

Moran was working rapidly but skillfully, not disturbing anything. He squatted by the dead man. "Knifed, four or five times," he said. "Somebody was mighty sore at him. Apparently the killer held him from behind with a hand over his mouth, so he couldn't yell. The murderer left him for dead, but he didn't die right off. He crawled over from where he got it—see that blood trail?"

Hickey nodded, said, "He got hold of the phone cord and pulled the receiver off. But the base stayed on the table."

"He was probably trying to call me, or get help," Moran said. "But he couldn't raise up. There's a splotch of dried blood where he gripped the table edge. And on the floor—look!"

Moran pointed at Ollie's outstretched hand. Hickey glanced over his shoulder. "Why, it's writing, Moran! He—he wrote in his own blood."



On the bare flooring they could distinguish shaky, uneven letters. "M O U X" read Hickey aloud. "What's that mean?"

"I think I know," growled Moran. "He tried to leave me a last tip. 'Mouse—Doublecross.' Here come the boys."

A moment later the room was filled with new arrivals from downtown, including a photographer and two fingerprint men.

Moran spoke with the officer in charge, a detective named Whaley whom Hickey knew. Neighboring doorbells would be rung, but in such a place, people seldom heard or saw anything—or they would never admit it.

"I want to move fast," Hickey heard Moran say.

Moran left Whaley in charge, and hustled back to his car with the reporter. "Here's a rundown, so you'll understand what goes on," said Moran, as they started off. "You know that series of clothing store stickups, cash only, and after-dark jobs we've been working on?"

"Yeah. It's been going on for a couple of months. Wasn't that killing last Thursday hooked to it?"

"We believe so. Usually there'd be only one or two clerks in the store. Maybe one would step out for coffee, or go in back. The thief would rush in, grab the cash from the register, and scram. He wore a plastic mask, gloves. You know how crooks are. If one pulls a successful job, he'll stick to his system. That's why M.O. is often a help. Anyhow, last Thursday a storekeeper snatched a gun from under his counter, and the stickup man shot and killed him. Now it's murder."

"So Ollie was working on it."

"Right. He got too close; that's why he died. He told me last night he believed the Mouse might have information on it. What he wrote in blood, as he was dying, gives me a good hunch."

"You think the Mouse may have knifed him?"

"Never. The Mouse is one Harry Uppes, a small-time thief. He hangs on the edges and steals crumbs. He's too timid to use a knife or gun. He keeps his big ears open and sells tips. I know his hangout and that's where we're bound."

Moran stopped near a garish sign marking a joint. The entry was down a couple of steps from the street level.

Hickey trailed him in. To the left was a bar, lined with flies perched on stools. To the right was a row of booths where couples sat, drinking, and eating, and making love. The light was dim.

A couple of bartenders were on duty and a waiter flitted here and there, taking and filling orders from the booths.

Moran said in a low voice, "Yeah there he is. See that crumb with the luscious blonde, second booth from the back? That's Harry Uppes."

Hickey looked at the smallish man in a dark suit who sat grinning across the narrow booth table at a pretty young woman in a pink dress. Uppes had thin, light hair, and Hickey could see the rodent resemblance, a pointed nose contrasting with a receding chin.

"Sit down and wait," said Moran.

He moved in fast. There was an empty booth next the one in which the Mouse and his lady friend sat. Moran shoved right in beside the girl, so that he was facing Uppes. Hickey, about to sit in the vacant booth, saw the Mouse's expression

of horrified panic as Uppes recognized the detective.

Hickey took a seat. The wooden back separated him from the party, but he could hear the talk.

"Oh—say—how're you, Moran?" The Mouse's voice squeaked a bit.

"You're under arrest for murder, Uppes," said Moran flatly, brutally.

"Murder! Me? I don't know what you mean—"

The girl gave a squeal of alarm.

"You and your buddy knifed Ollie Philman. Three witnesses saw you run out. Besides, Philman didn't die right off. He lived long enough to spill it all."

"It's a lie! I—I ain't been out of here all evening. Have I, Gert?"

"He's been right here with me—" began the blonde.

"Hold out your hands. You're coming with me," snapped Moran.

Hickey heard the jingle of the handcuffs. He knew what the detective was doing. Moran was hoping to panic Uppes and force him to tell all he knew. And from what he had seen of the Mouse, Hickey thought Moran would win out.

"We know all about you and your sidekick—the stickup who's been pullin' those clothing store jobs. You told Ollie who he was and we'll pick him up," bulled Moran. "That's why Ollie got knifed."

"No, I never touched him," wailed the Mouse. "I—"

Two women screamed. One was the blonde with the Mouse. The other was in the next booth down the line. There was a muffled explosion, like the snap of a cracking stick.

A heavy man, hunched over, pistol in one hand and raised for action, whooshed past Hickey's booth. He was half-turned, his face twisted in fury. His snub-nosed revolver pointed back at Moran.

Hickey stuck out his foot, just in the nick of time.

The fugitive tripped, his own weight carrying him heavily over and over as he rolled on the floor. His revolver slug ranged wild into the wall instead of hitting Moran.

It had taken the detective precious moments to extricate himself from between the seat and booth table. The screaming blonde had kept snatching his coat.

Now he catapulted into the aisle, service revolver up. The man Hickey had tripped came up in a crouch and the reporter had an impression of his angry face. The Mouse fell out of the booth on the floor. He had been hit and was screaming in pain and fear.

The gunman's pistol was coming round, taking careful aim. Moran fired a hasty one.

Moran's slug knocked the crouching gunman down. His pistol flew out of his hand, and his shoulders jerked convulsively.

Two jumps later and Moran

was in, kicking aside the snub-nosed gun, and grabbing his quarry.

THE FOLLOWING EVENING, Hickey dropped in at the precinct. Moran sat at his desk, his big feet up. He looked relaxed, but his grin was sheepish. "Thanks for the trip, John," he said. "I never figured it would shape up that fast. I just aimed to collar the Mouse and scare the truth out of him. How was I to know that Dollati—he's our stickup killer—was sittin' right in the next booth! Those two girls are sisters, and the Mouse had just got smitten by one."

"How is the Mouse?"

"He's got a painful wound in the ribs but he'll live. And he squawked, told me everything.

"Ollie was askin' around about Dollati, the holdup man. The Mouse told him a little but not enough to cinch it. Then the Mouse sold the tip back to Dollati, that Ollie was on his trail and mighty dangerous to him."

Lieutenant Moran hesitated a moment as he fished around in his pockets for a cigarette. Hickey handed him his package. The detective took one, lighted it, and went on talking.

"The Mouse had just met the sister of Dollati's girl and had fallen for her. Dollati realized, from what the Mouse told him, that Ollie was too close and knew too much. So he hustled around to Ollie's and grabbed him. He used his knife because it's quieter, and then, men like Dollati will always make a squealer suffer before he dies, if possible. That's the usual system.

"The Mouse tells me that when I walked in, Dollati, who was mighty jittery, figured the Mouse must've set him up for me. So Dollati took a quick one at the Mouse to shut him up, then he tried for me as he ran for it."

"How's Dollati?"

"He'll live, too—for his murder trial. Dollati's pistol has been checked. Ballistics show it's the gun that killed the storekeeper. He ought to fry eventually."

"So Ollie did all right for you, to the end."

Moran nodded grimly. "Sure he did. Ollie hadn't learned Dollati's name yet, but he was mighty close. When Ollie was stabbed and dying, he figured the Mouse must have squeaked. So he left that message for me, hoping I'd get to the killer through the Mouse."

THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every month

# ACT of GOD

*It was a brutal crime . . . but the penalty could hardly have been foreseen.*

by

**WYATT BLASSINGAME**

ALICE PARTRIDGE was a little, birdlike old woman, half crippled with arthritis, and rich. She and Emma got to be friends right off. Emma is always friendly with stray cats, old women and crip-

ples, with or without money. She goes around shedding so much sweetness it's apt to turn the stomach of someone like me, overexposed to it. It was the need for an antidote for this damn sweetness that sent me to Janet and Inez and some others, and into a lot of debt.

Also, it was Emma who told me about Mrs. Partridge's wall safe. And it was to Emma that old Mrs. Partridge gave the key to her house. We had rented the cottage on her grounds, were the nearest neighbors, and "Just in case something happens to me dear. I wouldn't want anybody to have to break the door down."

So in a way it was Emma who killed Alice Partridge. Was responsible for it anyway. Though any old woman who keeps money in a wall safe and lives alone, except for a damned police dog, is asking for trouble.

It was easy to plan. There were just two difficulties: the wall safe, and Lobo, the dog. I didn't know the combination to the safe, so I would have to make Mrs. Partridge open it. That meant she would know who I was. And that meant I would have to get rid of her. But she was old. She had lived her life anyway.

Tha left the dog. It was big as a pony. I had seen it kill rats. And I didn't doubt it would kill a man if Alice Partridge told it to. She had it trained.

Emma had made friends with the dog. It didn't like me. But I worked at it. Eventually it would take food out of my hand. That was enough.

I set up a legitimate business engagement in Miami. I told Emma I was going over on Tuesday. I told the office.

Sunday evening Emma was at church. She's always at church. You'd think they paid her. I opened a can of dog food in the kitchen and my hand slipped and I cut my right forefinger. It made me angry. It was a sign of nervousness, and I didn't want to be nervous.

I held my hand in front of me until it was perfectly steady. Then I made a patty from some of the dog food, loaded it with poison, and walked down the drive.

I knew where I would find the dog. Mrs. Partridge always let him run for an hour at dusk. I stood close against the bushes where I could not be seen and called him. He came slowly, head down.

"Here, Lobo." I held the food toward him. He licked it and my hand with it. He didn't like the taste and wouldn't take it in his mouth.

"Eat it!" I said. He nuzzled it. "Damn it!" I said, and caught him by the lower jaw, squeezed, and jammed the meat into his mouth with my forefinger. He was too trained to bite an acquaintance without orders. He broke free and spit out some of the food. But I

was fairly sure he had swallowed some of it, and it wouldn't take much.

Next day when I came home at noon Emma told me that Lobo was dead. Mrs. Partridge believed he had been poisoned. The vet was going to do an autopsy. "Big brute," I said. "It's a wonder somebody hasn't poisoned him before."

"He was a sweet dog," Emma said. (Everything is *sweet* to her.) "And Alice loved him."

"I suppose she'll get another one?"

"Sometime, maybe, but not soon. She was too devoted to Lobo."

That was the way I had figured.

Next morning I left for the job in Miami. It was about a three hour drive. I called on one customer, made a date with another for the next morning, and then found a motel. I left my car and hired a *U Drive It*, using a phony driver's license I'd got a couple of years before and kept up because sometimes it came in handy. I parked the *U Drive It* a block from the motel.

After dinner I bought a newspaper in the motel lobby, chatted with the owner, told him I was going to bed early, and went to my room. It was eight o'clock. I read the paper for an hour and a half, then turned out the lights.

I left my car in front of my room and took the *U Drive It*. Shortly after one o'clock I was back in Fort Myers. Wearing gloves, I opened Mrs. Partridge's door with the key I'd had made from the one she gave Emma, then followed the beam of my flashlight to her bedroom.

She was asleep. I put my left hand over her mouth. When her eyes popped open I told her that if she opened the door to her safe, and didn't make any trouble, she wouldn't be hurt. I held the blade of the knife in the beam of the flashlight, so she could see it.

There wasn't any trouble. She got out of bed. She wasn't any bigger than a child and she was shaking so she could barely stand. She had trouble opening the safe, but she got it at last. She turned, and as I swung the knife she saw just enough to know she had made a mistake.

I took only money, no jewels. I wasn't a professional; I wouldn't have known how to get rid of them without risk. And there was a lot of money. I left the old woman on the bedroom floor and went and re-locked the front door. Then I came back and opened a bedroom window. I climbed out, letting the window remain open. I trampled around in the flower bed, leaving the tracks of shoes I had brought, three sizes too large.

I was back in Miami before daylight.

I stayed in Miami two weeks. It was legitimate. I had work to do.

I talked to Emma on the telephone. She was all tears over Mrs. Partridge, but had no suspicions. The police had none; they hadn't even checked on me. I had no record. There was no reason for them to suspect me.

I was in the clear, absolutely. I had to be.

And yet I was nervous. Not about what had happened. I felt safe there. But I was jumpy without reason. I didn't have any appetite. I had a kind of dizzy spell. I wound up my work in Miami and went home.

Emma started right in talking, and weeping. "Whoever killed her," she said, "may think he got away safe. But God will punish him."

"God?" I said. "How does he get in on the act?"

"Lobo was poisoned by whoever killed Alice."

"Probably."

"Lobo would have died in a couple of days anyway. The vet found out when he did the autopsy. Lobo had rabies."

I heard my voice say, "Had what?"

"And now," Emma said, "the police are checking on everybody who goes for treatment, all over the country. Because if the murderer isn't treated soon it will be too late."

"But if he wasn't bitten—" I stopped.

I was looking at my right forefinger. Ten days ago the cut made by the can of dog food had been healed completely. Now it had re-opened. It was festering. And I remembered sticking it into Lobo's mouth to ram the poison down.

"In fact," Emma said, "it may already be too late."

"For what?"

"For the murderer to get treatment. I've been reading about it. Once the disease sets in—nervousness, loss of appetite, new inflammation of the wound—the treatment won't help. Nothing will help. He'll die, in agony."

My throat felt very dry. I wanted to swallow and couldn't. I could hardly speak. I said, "For God's sake, Emma, call the doctor!"

And we still don't know if the treatment began in time. We still don't know.

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**A New CHIP STACK Story**

# A PENCHANT FOR PENDANTS

*Lisa was so glamorous it was painful to think of her as a convicted jewel thief languishing in prison . . . Perhaps, Stack told himself, he could get around that—if he played it cool.*

**by TIGHE JARRATT**

CHIP STACK laced his fingers over his roly-poly stomach and leered at the movie screen like a shark spotting seal trapped in a cove. The girl on the screen moved directly under the camera, so that for the space of thirty seconds, the focus was directly upon what Vogue Magazine would have described as a breath taking, *plummeting decolletage.*

"Hmmm-unh!" Stack exploded out of lecherous thoughts.

"You caught it?" Richard Ramsey grunted, snapping off the projector. Ramsey was Chief of Claims and Settlements for the insurance company that supplied the backbone of Stack's income.

"Some trick!" Chip nodded, still in a halcyon dream world of mammalian splendor.

"That film was taken by March and Lambert's spy camera number six, positioned to cover the center counter of their diamond depart-

ment," Ramsey detailed. "There is no doubt that she lifted the bracelet. Her sleight was good enough to trick the clerk, but not a store detective who saw it and followed her out onto the sidewalk—a legal requirement in this state—where he placed her under citizen arrest for shoplifting."

"But when they searched her, she didn't possess the stolen article?" Chip Stack guessed.

"She had in her possession an identical bracelet," Ramsey said. "They phoned the station, had her booked, and then she had them. All modern jewelry of that quality carries a hallmark number. She produced a sales slip for the legitimate purchase of the piece found on her person, and slapped them with a lawsuit for false arrest."

Chip Stack grinned with respect. "Cute."

Ramsey smacked a stack of files in front of him. "Cute enough. She's hit a couple of dozen stores that we insure against such losses, and every one of them had to settle out of court."

"Did the stolen items ever turn up?" Stack asked.

Ramsey frowned. "Not all of them. But some were found elsewere on the store's premises."

"No confederate, no theft," Stack considered. "Each time she's let her first sleight get spotted. But she was slick enough to keep anyone from seeing her dispose of the shoplifted article."

"If she'd just steal something once, we might grab her," Ramsey growled. "But what the hell good would it do? She'd be out of the pen in a few months or a year and right back at this racket."

"You don't want her arrested?"

"Frankly, we don't give a damn. We want the racket busted up—if it can be done short of murder."

"*Tck, tck,*" Stack clucked with a touch of alarm. "Who could murder a woman with those—uh—talents?"

"Marry her then and make a good woman of her," Ramsey said with tart irony. "Now for the vital statistics. There is no record of conviction, no playing around with hoods. She plays the high edge of the big money crowd, and has excellent taste in clothes, home decor, cuisine and pastimes. Outside of gifts of jewelry, if she's ever been kept, we can't find out about it."

"Angling for a bigtime marriage," Chip Stack guessed.

"Another year or two of this racket, and she won't need it!" Ramsey said, and scowled. "She owns six small apartment houses or rental cottage setups at resorts now." His steely eyes drilled Chip Stack. "And we've paid for most of them! My deal with you is to bust this up before we get hit again—if you want your fee. I'll go for one more trick, so you can catch her MO—then no repeats."

"I'd rather catch her SA," Stack

muttered. He picked up the files. "One question—any key to the way she picks her towns and stores?"

"Maybe, maybe not," Ramsey said. "She seems to hit the smaller cities before holidays such as Christmas, and the larger cities and spas just at the beginning of social seasons."

"Smart," Stack said. "Sales help are so busy they don't remember when she comes back a second time for a duplicate article. She's probably getting set to hit New York again about now."

Ramsey waved his hand. "Take it away. It's your baby."

"I sure hope," Stack murmured with predatory anticipation. But there was also the gloomy side. She was obviously a smart chick, a non-crime criminal, and he was probably going to have to frame her—a matter which would deeply wound his sense of chivalry. That is, in the case of a beautiful woman, with a plummeting decolletage like hers.

He made his M4 snort and burp uptown, hitting the nightclub society belt while the elite bistros were making up for cocktails. It was a time of day bartenders had time to talk as they peeled their lemons and there was nobody around to hear them. At such times, a five dollar tip accomplished miracles.

He had the girl's two names, the one she'd been born with, Hermione Gottsmensch, and the one she used, Lisa Torcquille. He also had photos of her, taken off the spy camera films, but pix of fashionable women were too easily confused. Luckily, he told himself, an enthusiastic description of her plummeting neckline should do the trick.

It did. His first three stops were misses, summed up by Barney at La Tour—"If any dame like that had been in here, I'd sure remember."

In the Lace Room at the north end of the Johnson East one of the night bartenders recalled that a new customer had been stopping in, as if she lived in the neighborhood. She'd been giving him heart failure with anxiety that she might spill out in her cocktail.

"Always different jewelry," he said. "She must have the loot stacked."

"What did she look like?" Stack asked.

The bartender looked at him blankly. "I just got through telling you," he grunted, using his hands to gesture down his chest.

There couldn't be two of them, Chip Stack thought. Not with so much jewelry and stacked like that.

He drifted one block south, to the Knight Room at the south end of the plush hotel and struck raw gold. A young lady in company with A.T.C. Throckmorton, the financier, had been stopping nightly

between eleven and twelve to go dreamy over Jani Sarkozi and his fiddle. The *maitre d'* remembered her particularly—in spite of the spot being a veritable beehive of glamor—because she had worn two jewelled clips that must have

been pinned into her. It was the only thing he could see that held her dress up.

Stack drove over to his East River penthouse and energetically sprawled out on his oversized divan with a Scotch and soda and the telephone. Mrs. Dodo Trevelyn said impatiently that she had a dinner date already, but Chip Stack persuaded her to break it by reminding her that her divorce was still in process. There was some testimony that he had chivalrously forgotten, but he was now on the verge of remembering.

An hour later he picked her up in evening dress. After two of his special sidecars at the Baroquette, she forgot her chagrin at being slightly blackmailed and made a very acceptable stand-in for Lisa Torcquille. She was feeling no pain whatever when they arrived at the Knight Room at ten after eleven.

The place was already crowded, but there were two adjoining tables reserved at Stack's request. They had scarcely ordered a drink before the distinguished Throckmorton arrived at the next table escorting a dream with the hair and face of Cleopatra, the rhythm of Egypt's serpent-goddess, and—well, there was just no comparison possible for her decolletage.

"Well!" Dodo gasped with envy's venom. "Would you call it a night club bikini?"

"I'd call it awful good," Chip Stack murmured distantly. Bikini was an entirely wrong description, but there was certainly enough of Lisa's sinuous body showing, and it was all sensuous.

Stack ran an index finger under his collar and wondered how he'd gotten a size too small. He dragged his thoughts out of the personal realm with effort. Lisa was smart and cool and self-possessed. She did not as much as deign to notice the incipient commotion she was creating. It was going to be damned hard to trap her, and no simple thing just to get to know her.

He took a more professional inventory of her than he would have preferred to do right at that mo-

ment. Somewhere, there had to be a weakness in her armor. Tonight she was wearing spangles, seventeen on one sinuous arm, to be exact. Of the seventeen, he identified twelve as being connected with her racket lawsuits. She more than collected jewelry; she really loved it. It was probably the psychological basis that had inspired her gimmick.

He turned back to Dodo and lighted her cigarette. Her ruffles subsided slowly, but she was still glaring past him at Lisa as she said with disdain, "That's all modern that she's wearing. And not a custom piece in it. I've got almost exactly the same emerald and baget spangle. She'd look better in just two or three good pieces."

Stack was sure Lisa Torcquille must have heard. It was just the sort of comment that a woman never misses, and even though she gave no indication, she'd have one ear tuned in.

"I can see your point," he said diplomatically. "A woman like that doesn't need any jewelry. Still, it suits her. I'd like to see her wearing those jewels of Tutankhamen's queen that are up at the museum."

Stack struck pay dirt. From the tail of his eye, he saw her shift her position ever so slightly to listen in better.

Dodo said with her most accentuated Vassar voice, "That isn't just jewelry—it's sheer art. You wouldn't have to know anything about gems to know that craftsmanship like that could only have been inspired by a queen."

Yes, Lisa was tuned in, all right. She lifted her head a little higher and held it that way as she smoked. She came a little straighter in the back, too. Oddly, it made her appear more sensuous than ever. Stack gulped a drink hurriedly and had difficulty keeping his thoughts on cold-blooded intrigue.

He said finally, "You know, it's a funny thing about that collection. It's two collections, actually, The Pharaoh ordered one for his queen and a similar set for his favorite daughter. The tomb robbers never found the room where these jewels were discovered, yet somehow, the queen's set of earrings disappeared."

"They'd be priceless," Dodo murmured.

"Well, not so priceless if they can't be authenticated. And of course, they never can be or they'd be termed stolen property and repossessed. But they'd be beautiful, and the owner would have the satisfaction of knowing what they were."

"I remember looking at the pair at the museum," Dodo said. "They're pendant shaped, some solid dark stone with a single blue diamond down near a rose-grey tip."

"You didn't get the significance?" Chip Stack asked with a faint smile.

Dodo looked self-conscious. "Should I have?"

"The pendants are precious jade, the color of the dark before dawn, with the first rose-grey light of dawn just lifting over the desert. The single diamonds represent the Star of Egypt, the morning star, as it hangs above the Nile. If you counted the facets, you'd find they number exactly the same as the points we think we see when we look at our Morning Star on a cold winter dawn."

Stack reached for a cigarette as excuse for a good look at Lisa Torcquille's sinuous white back and knew his dramatic little picture had really struck a chord. Lisa's beautiful hand was skimming along her cheek under her soot-thick hair to touch her ear. He could not see her ear, but they were like thin, delicate, translucent shells he knew from photos, and she often wore her hairdo back and tight, so that she could wear earrings.

He slapped his cigarette into his shark-shaped mouth and thought, *Score. But where do we go from here?* From here, he had to make a story up.

Dodo said, "I've never worn earrings, but you make it sound as if I should."

"Well, I'll tell you a secret not even the museum knows. In fact, the store selling them doesn't know," Stack said loudly enough to be heard next door. "The stolen earrings were probably smuggled into this country and all trace of them vanished. Then—this is only a guess, but it's a good one—they got mixed in with a batch of quite expensive reproduction jewelry. They still aren't cheap, but considering that they're the real thing, they're selling for a song."

Dodo's bargain instinct was aroused. "Chip—who has got them?"

"Now, I'd have to check. I was only in on the middle deal. But if you're seriously interested, I could find out in the morning. Why don't you meet me at the Collonaire about noon tomorrow and I'll have the data."

"I couldn't possibly get there before one," she complained.

"All right, be late!" Stack grinned. "I can spend the time sneaking an extra drink and watching the glamor parade."

At the next table, Lisa mashed out her cigarette and lifted a shimmering otter coat about her shoulders. It was not, perhaps, the most expensive fur in the world, but it was certainly one that suited her. The design had a personal luxuriousness about it that made even sables in the room look like bargain furs.

Rising to leave, she looked straight at Chip Stack. It was the briefest of glances. Not an expression of interest showed on her marble-smooth face. But he knew that her mind had recorded every hair on his head.

He was not at all surprised when she arrived at the Collonaire next day at twelve-eighteen, and took a table adjoining his in the cocktail lounge, as if waiting for a luncheon partner. She ordered a very light cordial, produced a very beautiful, inlaid Persian cigarette case and searched her handbag for a lighter.

Chip Stack extended his own torch. "May I? I seem to be haunting your footsteps the last few days."

She accepted the light with the cool graciousness of a beautiful woman used to such attentions, expelled the smoke and studied him with eyes like the pits of smoldering volcanoes.

"You do look familiar," she murmured.

"I was your nearest admirer at the Knight last night. Next table."

"Of course." She smiled. "You were with that lovely girl in amethyst organdy. You were talking about the Carnavon treasures. I overheard you mention the mysterious missing pendants."

She came straight to the point! he thought. No moss growing on this gal.

Stack made a deprecating gesture. "I'm afraid I spoke out of turn. I thought I knew where a very similar pair were for sale. But I find I've lost the trail for the moment."

She dug in her handbag and handed him an advertisement torn from the morning *Times*. "Would that be the pair? It's only a sketch, of course."

Chip Stack stared with disbelief. Was he getting clairvoyant without knowing it? It seemed too much, an incredible coincidence. But there were the duplicate earrings, offered by Clivez as 'Honorable antique facsimiles of the mysteriously vanished originals belong to Tutankhamen's queen.' Price—eleven thousand dollars.

"That could be the pair," he stalled. "But then, it could be that the ad is honest."

She had very mobile lips, possessed, yet sensuous. She screwed them into a little moue of consideration as she re-studied the ad herself. "They'd still be very beautiful, at that price," she murmured. "But what a find if they should turn out authentic!"

Stack laughed. "Strange things happen where historic gems are concerned," he informed her.

It was simply something to say. His mind was racing over possibilities he had made up the story originally only in the hope of establishing contact without rousing suspicion. But this coincidence might have cut him out of his own game. However, he could see no harm that might come of it.

Clivez happened to be one of the stores she had already sued for false arrest. They'd have her spotted the instant she walked in there. And there was no way she could build a second case of this, even

if she was able to lay out that much money. There'd be no duplicate set of pendants to work the racket with. Probably, if she really wanted them, she'd take Throckmorton to see them.

"I would love to have them if there were any chance," she said.

"Well, I'm pretty sure the price is beyond Dodo—the young lady you saw last night—so I'm not letting her down. Something may still come of the inquiries I've started. I could phone you with whatever turns up."

She was thoughtful for a moment. "Why, that would be most gallant of you," she said at last. "My name is Lisa Torcquille, and I am staying at the Hutton Plaza. Do you think you might know by tomorrow?"

"I'll make every effort," Stack said. "But I don't think you're in danger of anybody snatching them at first look. After all, that is quite a sum for anything advertised as a *facsimile* reproduction."

She gave him a cool but friendly smile and nodded for her check. "I will appreciate your call," she said. "If you don't want to speak on the phone, I could meet you for a drink."

That was precisely what he did want and he was careful not to spoil her act by offering to pay her check now.

"I was meeting a friend, but I just haven't time to wait," she said. She laid down a tip, smiled again, with a twinkle in her eyes this time and got up to leave. "Until cocktails, then," she murmured. Her voice hung on the air like the scent of spice.

Dodo did not arrive until one-thirty-five, but Stack spent the time pleasantly contemplating what Lisa would look like without a bikini, alternating with the gloomier thought of how he could bust her racket without putting her in jail.

Dodo Trevelyn came in breathlessly and tore him from his dream world. "I was at my lawyers, right near Clivez, and stopped to see the earrings you were talking about," she gushed.

Everybody, apparently, had seen that advertisement except Stack.

"And guess what?" she demanded mysteriously.

"What?" he sighed.

"That bold and brazen woman you were oggling last night must have been listening to us. She came into the jewelry department just as I was leaving, and she went right to the case that held the earrings!"

Chip Stack did a double take and rushed to the phone to call Lisa's hotel. Yes, she had been staying there, the clerk informed him, but she had checked out that morning, leaving no forwarding address. A chauffeur driving a station wagon had called for her luggage just before noon.

Stack's mouth tightened. She'd already checked out at the time she invited him to phone her! Had she stopped the Collonaire simply to check on where he was, already knowing who he was? Or had he pulled some blooper giveaway?

He made a second call to Clivez's security officer. The man's snarling bark as he answered his phone gave Stack the story before he'd asked a question.

"Yes, she was here and yes, I had her spotted," the store detective rasped. "She made a bee line for the Egyptian counter and asked to see the Stars of Egypt. She examined them under the daylight, held them to her ears and such, but I was watching her damned close, you can bet on that."

"She buy 'em?"

"What for when she could lift 'em? She pulled the fastest sleight I've ever heard of, replacing two imitations made of sealing wax and crystal chips. I'd seen nothing. I took a deep breath as the clerk replaced the tray, I can tell you, but she was already up to her old tricks. She rushed the clerk down to the next counter to see some thirty-five hundred dollar diamond bracelets."

"Then she saw you?"

"You can bet she saw me. I was standing on her like her shadow. She handed the bracelet back to the clerk, gave me a knife look, and flounced out. I followed her down and out to the taxi and opened the door for her. 'Come again,' I told her. I wanted her to be sure we remembered her. It was maybe twenty minutes before the next customer wanted to see the Star pendants. It was a customer who knew her gems and she squawked. That's the first we knew they'd been switched."

"Maybe the switch will show on the spy film," Stack suggested.

"It will like hell. We've already had it developed. She must have known right where that camera was, and she was careful to stand out of focus. Unless she's picked up with the Stars, we haven't got a thing on her."

Chip Stack hung up with grudg-

ing respect for the girl. He made one more call to a friend at the museum. Lisa was easily identified as the first visitor to the Carnavon collection when the museum opened that morning. She had been very interested in the Stars of Egypt, asked all about the missing pair, including the dimensions and placement of the diamonds.

So, she'd gone home, made up her ten-cent imitations, and checked out of the hotel. Probably Throckmorton's chauffeur had picked up her luggage. She stopped by the Collonaire just to check Stack's whereabouts, and then, wasting no time, had hit the store. She had baited the security officer into following her downstairs, which would prevent the slip of his finding out about the switch before she got out of the store!

That took cool nerve, he thought. He almost hoped that she had a confederate she'd unloaded the stolen gems on, but he felt pretty sure she worked alone. She wasn't dumb enough to trust a confederate or split the loot. Otherwise, why bother to check out of her hotel? She'd have the jewels on her, and while the police were watching the commercial airports, stations and highways out of town, she'd be taking A.T.C. Throckmorton's private plane for distant climes.

Stack gave the captain a bill and hasty message for Dodo Trevelyn and hurried out to his M4. Its nasty snarl cleared the traffic from in front of him as he sped to the airport. There were three hangars for private planes out there, but the elite one would be Throckmorton's. He saw the sleek plane fueling up on the apron before the building hid it from view.

Lisa Torcquille was sitting slantwise on a table in the front waiting room, smoking and sipping a bottle of coke impatiently. Her knees were crossed and he felt a pang of sincere remorse at what he was about to do. Nobody with a body like that should be incarcerated—at least, before he even got to know her.

"Well," she said coolly, when Stack approached her, "our paths do keep crossing, don't they?"

Stalling for time, he thought—*She won't try to make a break, but she'll try to jettison the Stars.*

"Matter of fact, I tailed you out here," he grunted.

He saw her eyes widen with surprise at his admission.

"This time, Hermione Gottsmensch, we've got a real rap against you."

Mockery floated on her eyes. "What have you got?"

"This," he said. His hand dart-under her midnight hair and tore off the earring he found there.

She jerked at the hurt but made no outcry. "You arresting me?" she said.

"That's about it."

Her volcanic eyes spit glowing lava. "You try that and Clivez will really pay this time!"

"These are the Stars of Egypt you lifted from Clivez's jewel case."

She smiled nastily. "You can prove that without a hallmark on them? Clivez announced them as copies. If there was one copy made, there could be dozens. And I've got a lawyer will make Clivez cry uncle."

"Maybe," Stack acknowledged. "But we've got some press agents will make Throckmorton wish he'd never seen you."

Her eyes flicked and dropped. He saw he'd scored, and he felt lousy about it.

"Would you settle for possession and keep it strictly quiet?" she asked heavily.

"Year and a day? That's seven months. You keep him on the hook that long?"

"Maybe." There was a desperate tinge to her voice. "If he didn't learn the truth."

Chip Stack scratched his head. "You like swimming?" he grunted irrelevantly.

Her face lifted back to him. She was too smart to blurt some cliche. She reached for a fresh cigarette and lighted it with a steady hand. "What's on your mind?"

"I'm just wondering how you'd tan in a week on the beach at Mazatlan."

"You mean, while I'm on bail?"

"We could do it another way," he said. "Give me a voluntary confession; I'll return the pendants, and Clivez will drop the charge."

She laughed. "Nice try. I confess to grand larceny and you throw the book at me!"

"We'd rather have you without a record, but with that confession in our safe," he said. "I'm not working for Clivez. I'm for their insurance company."

"And for what pleasant little blackmail do you want the confession, then?"

"To keep you from being falsely arrested again," he said, and grinned. "We feel you've been unjustly treated too often. We would really like to see you married to Throckmorton."

She laughed suddenly, a low, liquid chuckle in her vital throat. She slipped off the table with the movement of a surfboard slipping down a wave.

"I suppose Mazatlan is just thrown in to process me into my new spotless character?"

"Well—it's a processing," Chip Stack admitted.

She nodded. "ATC wasn't going to meet me for ten days anyway. I can phone him that I've changed plans. How long will this first part of the processing take?"

"Not long, Lisa," Chip Stack assured her.

He heard his own voice with surprise. It damned near sounded like a horse's whinny.

# UNACCUSTOMED AS I AM TO PUBLIC DYING

## by LARRY MADDOCK

*When a public official dies in mysterious circumstances, in plain view of everyone, a lot of wheels start turning. But Shaffer was too good a newspaperman to just mark time.*

IT WAS THE Fourth of July and the only thing interesting about the assignment was the strawberry blonde I'd met that afternoon in Public Relations. I'd brought her along to keep me awake.

"You know," she smiled, looking at me through her eyelashes, "you're the laziest reporter I've ever met."

"I'd fancied myself a paragon of industry," I rejoined, glancing up at the speakers' stand, where my briefcase was unobtrusively taping the predictable phrases of Mayor Stryder. We'd spread our blanket on the grass next to the platform and, fortified with a thermos of vodka martinis, were prepared for a minor siege.

Cathy Rogers laughed. She was in her early twenties and I was roughly fifteen years her senior, a fact we both were pretending to ignore. She was still somewhat awed by me, but at least she was

now beyond the "Mr. Shaffer" stage and was calling me Ted, which augured well for the future. I'm not often the subject of such breathless adulation and I was enjoying it tremendously.

The floodlights of the football field glittered on Stryder's wheelchair as he neared the end of his speech. Hardly anyone was listening, and the Mayor knew it. They'd all come here to watch the fireworks. Being an astute politician, Stryder limited himself to about two hundred words and then wheeled back to his place on the stand.

The floods winked out and the Fallbrook Fire Department's annual extravaganza was underway. About three rockets later I remembered the briefcase and got up to retrieve it, turning it off in the process. Then I groped my way back to the interesting proximity of Miss Rogers.

The body was discovered when the lights went on again.

At first it was just a minor commotion on the speakers' stand. Then I heard a hysterical shriek and someone saying, in a voice tremulous with shock, and incredulity, "Good Lord! He's dead!"

I spun around to see a group clustered around the shiny wheelchair, and vaulted onto the stand.

Bob Clough and Councilman Jim Davis were bending over the Mayor's body, which was slumped in the wheelchair. Clough, as coroner and mortician, had taken charge instantly.

Stryder's wife was lost in a paroxysm of hysteria, the brim of her huge picture hat flopping incongruously with each outburst—it was hard to tell if she was laughing or crying. City Treasurer Tom Richards was attempting to comfort her.

Fire Chief Dan Marsh and I, from opposite sides, scrambled onto the platform. Clough stepped away from the body to ask Marsh to summon the meatwagon; Mrs. Stryder's hysteria stopped abruptly as she heard the word.

I presented myself to Clough, who was unwrapping an antacid tablet.

"Bob," I said. "What did he die of?"

Clough looked at me blankly for a moment, popping the pill into his mouth. "Oh, it's you, Shaffer." His professional reflexes had only partly taken over; he was obviously stunned by Stryder's death. "I don't know yet. Stroke, I guess, but of course I can't tell for sure until I've made an examination. Call me in about an hour. I'll know more then."

"Sure," I said, and spent the next three minutes finding a phone booth.

Howdy Jackson, night editor at the *Bulletin,* was shocked at the news. "Stryder? Dead? I'm sorry to hear that, Ted."

"Howdy, you surprise me. I

thought you voted against him in the last two elections."

"I did. But he was colorful—and human. How'd it happen?"

I told him what little I knew, adding: "I'll come in with it later, but I thought you'd like to get started."

I returned then to Cathy and noted that she'd folded the blanket and had stowed the thermos out of sight.

"It'll take maybe five minutes more," I informed her, "and then we can go. Sorry this had to happen."

"I'll wait," she said.

A knot of the curious had formed around the stand. Grabbing the briefcase, I thumbed the tape back into service and shouldered through to the stand again. Marsh assured me nervously that this was the first fatality ever to be associated with the Fourth of July celebration in the department's history. Councilman Jim Davis, who'd had the honor of introducing Stryder to the crowd, practically implied that on all future Fourths of July the flags would fly not only in observance of Independence Day but to commemorate the death of a great and courageous American.

The Mayor's widow, I noted, had been removed to a less emotionally taxing spot, Coroner Clough was missing, and Dan Marsh was presiding over the body.

Satisfied that I had all the material I'd be able to get right then, I collected Cathy and we hurried to my car, some two hundred yards away.

Apparently, the Mayor's death had dimmed the stars in Cathy's eyes, for she sat silently on her side of the seat, clutching the folded blanket in her arms, while I fought traffic.

As it was now after ten-thirty, and the *Bulletin* goes to bed at eleven, there was no time to return Miss Rogers to her apartment.

"Join me," I invited, "and watch a great reporter at work."

"I think I'd rather go straight home, she said. "But if you really insist—"

## II

WE LET OURSELVES in the side door and hurried up the back stairs to the city room, where Howdy was poring over clips on Stryder and making busy noises in brief bursts at his typewriter.

I read over his shoulder long enough to see that he had the situation well in hand, took the girl and my briefcase to my own cubicle, wound the tape back to where the quotes began and copied the meat from it.

Cathy, acting as copyboy, shuttled my paragraphs over to Jackson, who made the required editorial gestures with scissors and

pastepot to incorporate them into what he had already written.

On the phone, Clough confirmed his earlier diagnosis. "Definitely a stroke, Shaffer. The funeral will be at two Saturday afternoon at First Presbyterian, Reverend G. W. Hamilton officiating. The ashes will be inurned later that day at Forest Hope."

"That was quick," I observed. "Isn't it customary for politicians to lie in state for a while?"

"The family requested it, Shaffer," the coroner said, then added caustically, "I suppose this makes you quite happy, doesn't it?"

"Badgering the incumbent is part of my job," I grinned. "I'll be just as hard on the next man. Thanks, Bob."

I paragraphed the funeral arrangements and forwarded them to Jackson. Then I labeled the tape, filed it, put a fresh reel in the briefcase and bade Howdy adieu.

"I apologize, Cathy, for dragging you into this," I said when we were once again in the car.

"Well, I do think it was thoughtless of the Mayor to die on our night out," she said. "You want to apologize for that, too?"

"Hardly," I said. "I've never been known as Stryder's spokesman."

"Oh? I thought you liked him as much as everyone else seemed to."

"He had his points," I admitted. "He was one of the few politicians I've encountered who didn't have to be misquoted to make sense in print."

"I liked his speech tonight, didn't you?"

"It was quotable. Stryder usually was."

"You don't seem upset about his death. How come?"

I shrugged. "We weren't exactly friends. Still, I guess a gesture of respect is in order. I have a bottle or two we could use as the basis of a private wake."

"It's pretty late, Ted," she protested.

"If left alone I might become maudlin about it."

"That wouldn't really do." She hesitated. "Well, okay. Just remember I have to be at work at nine."

IT WAS A beautiful bottle but we hardly touched it. Normally, I have very little interest in women who have not yet reached the seasoning age of twenty-five; Cathy Rogers was a rare exception. She had black eyes, pink cheeks, pink lips and a showgirl build although she was a full head shorter than most showgirls. She also had lovely legs and was lightly salted with freckles from top to toe.

But more important than surface considerations was the feeling I got that something interesting was going on under her lovely surface.

She seemed preoccupied at first but after the second highball she'd

relaxed enough for me to resume Operation Cathy full force. Soft lights, sweet music and gentle flattery had never failed me yet. I was telling her how refreshingly different she was from most of the girls I'd known when she asked if the Mayor was heavily insured.

"Probably," I said. "Why?"

"I was thinking of Mrs. Stryder. Her future, I mean. Do they have any children?"

"None. I think she's his only survivor."

"Sort of an odd looking woman," Cathy murmured. "Did you notice her hat?"

I frowned. "Yeah. Big, floppy thing, wasn't it? Why?"

"Well, you wear a picture hat to keep the sun off, but it's out of place late at night. I wonder if she's sorry to see him go?"

"I doubt it," I said. "I imagine Stryder was a difficult man to live with."

"Because he was paraplegic?"

"Because he was a bully. I interviewed him at his home a couple of years ago. I wouldn't call his attitude towards her at that time very diplomatic. You have beautiful eyes."

Cathy frowned. "He bullied her?"

"Ordered her out of the room. Called her an idiot. Why the sudden interest in Stryder's domestic life?"

"Curiosity," she said, shrugging. "Did he have any enemies?"

"Every successful politician does," I said. "Are you trying to make a federal case out of a stroke?"

She laughed. "Suppose it wasn't a stroke? Suppose the Coroner was covering up for someone?"

"Clough may not be the most likeable man in the world," I assured her, "but he wouldn't cover

up for anybody. He's almost too honest for politics, if you know what I mean."

"Wouldn't it be interesting, though," she mused, "if someone had killed Stryder?"

"Fascinating," I agreed. "What sort of motive?"

"Insurance, politics, revenge—anything," she said airily. "Who am I to say?"

"As I was saying," I resumed hopefully, "you are refreshingly different. Why didn't I discover you before?"

"Maybe you didn't look?"

## III

I ARRIVED AT the *Bulletin* promptly at nine the following morning and went up to the city room, where Stanton Pritchard was waiting for me. In the two or three hundred years Pritch has served as city editor he's earned the title Mr. Legree, bestowed upon him by generations of reporters. He seems, moreover, to enjoy the role.

Pritch wanted me to cover the political implications of Stryder's death, so I went to City Hall.

Thelma White, the Mayor's secretary for the past eight years, had seen the *Bulletin* headline on her way in to work and was still in a daze in her office.

"It's quite a shock, Ted," she told me. "Were you there when it happened?"

"Yes," I admitted.

Thelma smiled crookedly. "He was working like a fury yesterday —now it all goes down the drain. What do you know!"

"You worked yesterday?" I asked. "On a holiday?"

"Holidays never meant much to the Great White Father."

"Who's going to take his place?"

Thelma shrugged. "According to the City Charter, when a mayor dies the council appoints a Mayor *Pro Tem*. Two months ago it would have been Art Vincent. He planned to oppose Stryder in the next election, anyway, but he's dead, too. Probably Jim Davis now. He'll make a try for it, anyway."

I nodded. Vincent would have been a much better choice, but he'd died in an auto accident.

"You admired Stryder, didn't you?" I asked.

"Just between us girls, I think he was a louse. June tried to leave him several times, but he had it rigged so if she did she'd be destitute. Please don't print that—to the public he was a hero. They didn't know him like I did."

"I imagine the secretaries to successful politicians often feel that way when the boss dies."

"Successful politician—that's a laugh. He enjoyed being a success *at* politics. There's a difference. He was a string-puller from the word go."

"Who'll benefit most from his death?"

Thelma frowned. "I don't know. June Stryder, I hope. It's the best thing that could have happened to her. Politically? Davis, I suppose. I'll be looking for another job. So will most of Phil's appointees."

"You think there's a shake-up in the offing?"

"There has to be. Victory goes to the wheeler dealers, you know that. It might be fun to watch, as long as you don't get hurt."

"Can you be hurt by it?"

"Not any more. I'm out of it, thank goodness."

A Western Union messenger arrived then with a fistful of tele-

grams. I went in search of Tom Richards.

The cute young thing in his outer office ushered me into the City Treasurer's presence. Richards looked a bit hung-over this morning, a condition which accented his usual gaunt appearance and made his lean frame look as if it were made of old coathangers. He'd prepared a brief statement; now he handed me a copy.

"Where do you go from here, Tom?" I asked.

"Depends on who runs, I suppose."

"Who's the likely candidate?"

"Why don't you talk to Jim Davis? He's asked for a council meeting Monday night."

"The *Pro Tem* election," I said.

"Right. I don't want the job myself. I'm busy enough as it is."

"In the November general election will you file again for treasurer?"

"I haven't made up my mind. I may accept a position in private industry."

"Any offers, Tom?"

Richards smiled. "Not for publication."

"Who might want the *Pro Tem* slot?"

"Well, Goodson took over as gadfly when Vincent died. He might make a token bid. Norris is a crusader, but he's all wrapped up in his vice probe. Privately, I'd put my money on Davis. But I wouldn't bet too much."

"You'll vote for him Monday night?"

Richards smiled again. "No comment."

Behind every politician, I knew, are the people who put him in office, the moneyed elements who financed his campaign. Before Stryder took over, Fallbrook was controlled by the real estate faction which had come into power during the building boom after World War II and created a complex of semi-suburban shopping centers as nucleii for ambitious housing developments. New industries had been wooed with tricky tax exemptions and a loaded zoning commission in order to attract droves of workers from other areas who were in turn quite efficiently fleeced by the real estate boys.

Tom Richards had been a realtor himself at one time, but had broken with the pack and was picked by the Stryder machine as an attempt to split the real estate bloc.

Councilman Benjamin Norris, known as "the churchman's choice," had lent an air of sanctity to Stryder's campaign. Currently he headed the Mayor's Committee for the Study of Vice and Organized Crime. I cornered him, five minutes later, as he was emerging from Murray Bronstein's office.

"My special report is almost finished," he informed me rather nervously. "I wish I had a Mayor

to report to." He was a bland-faced, ineffectual-looking man of fifty-five, with shiny skin and a voice at once thin, nasal and a bit dainty.

"Is it true that you'll be a candidate for *Pro Tem?*"

"It's possible. I won't know until Monday, though."

"How about the November election?"

"If I should decide to file," Norris said vaguely, "the information will be released to all media simultaneously." Translation: *I still don't know which way the wind is blowing.*

"Has your vice investigation been a success, Councilman?"

He hesitated a moment and primmed his lips. "Very much so. It'll blow the lid off. You may quote me on that."

Norris scurried off down the corridor and I opened the door to the City Attorney's office. One of Stryder's first moves upon assuming office had been to take over the Civil Service Commission, "In order to eliminate possible corruption."

The Commission, reorganized, operated on a 'merit' system which had enough loopholes to allow the Mayor to handpick a number of key figures. These, obviously, were the appointees Thelma said would be looking for new jobs. Murray Bronstein was one of them.

Bronstein was putting on his hat as I entered.

"Any comment on Stryder's death?" I asked.

Bronstein chose his words carefully. "A tragic occurrence. His hand at the tiller was a sure one. It's up to all of us to see that the ship does not founder without him. That sound respectful enough?"

"Lovely. I'll make sure your name is spelled right. Off the record, who's going to take over?"

He tapped a fat portfolio. "Norris just gave me his report. I'm going to weed the libel out of it this weekend, and if there's anything left we'll consider it Monday night."

"You're not answering my question," I said.

"Ted," he said fondly, "you know as well as I do that Stryder created that committee to perpetuate his reform image and to pacify the conservatives. Personally, off the record, I doubt it'll be a threat to the so-called vice lords Norris likes to rant about. But if there's a safe issue in here, it might influence the council's choice for *Pro Tem.*"

"You still haven't answered my question."

Bronstein's grin was gleeful. "I guess I didn't, did I?"

"Let me put it this way. If Davis gets in, where does that leave you?"

Murray Bronstein blinked thoughtfully. He was well aware that I knew of the friction between him and Jim Davis. "I'll be able to

go back into private practice. There's more money in it and fewer ulcers."

"I've never figured out why you joined Stryder's team in the first place," I said.

Bronstein's face became unreadable. "It was a challenge," he said softly, "once upon a time."

## IV

COUNCILMAN JIM DAVIS received me in his private office and closed the door behind us. "Bourbon? Rye? Scotch?" he inquired.

"Rye," I told him and he decanted a generous portion.

He had the same intensity, the same aura of strength about him that Stryder had possessed. But it takes far more than personality to win an election. Maybe Davis had it; I didn't know.

With a distinguished war record, Stryder had done it by proving his executive ability in the insurance business and winning favor up and down Main Street by reorganizing the Chamber of Commerce into a major pressure group. With the Chamber, the American Legion and V.F.W. in his pocket, he rode in on a 'reform ticket' which included a politically expedient but potentially troublesome list of candidates for the City Council.

Jim Davis was backed by the manufacturing interest and brought with him a campaign contribution which could not be ignored. What additional backers Davis had acquired in the ensuing eight years remained to be seen.

"I wanted to talk to you alone, Ted," he said, standing by a window. "Your newspaper represents the thinking people of this city. You have been highly critical, on occasion, of Mayor Stryder's practices and some of his objectives. But I think you understood him. I think you know that he placed the welfare of the city above personal gain or petty politics. His goal was to be a good administrator—which I think he was."

"A bit gaudy," I furnished, "in a chrome-plated sort of way."

Davis coughed. "The Mayor's commitment to those principles of liberty for which our ancestors gave their lives was tempered only by his sense of responsibility to the people. In less than eight years his administration has eliminated the eyesores from the public conscience. We have a clean city, a

decent city, thanks to Phil Stryder. But the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, which is why the Mayor's Committee on Vice was created."

"Norris says his report will blow the lid off."

"Norris is an old maid," Davis snorted. "He sees bogeymen under every bed. He's valuable, however, but powerless unless backed by a strong Mayor."

"Such as yourself."

"Perhaps." Davis smiled and sipped at his drink.

"Would you have opposed Stryder in the coming election?"

"No. But I am probably the only one who could take the reins and keep the machine running now that Phil's dead. Through me the good government Fallbrook has enjoyed over the past eight years will continue. My objectives are identical with Stryder's. Although some of my co-workers may not like me, I think they can be persuaded to back me."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I'll need your support. I respect you, oddly enough, and I expect you to take pot shots at me after I'm Mayor. Stryder made the mistake of getting sore at you. I shall not."

"Are you worried about the Norris report?"

"Not at all."

"What do you propose to do in case he actually has uncovered a few cesspools?" I asked.

"His report will be studied and acted upon where action is warranted. I'm sure I'll have the full cooperation of the Police Commissioner in this respect."

Translation: *give a little, get a little. The P. D. would be richer by two squad cars.*

I remembered Bronstein's remark about going into private practice. "Can you tell me who you've picked as your new City Attorney?"

Davis lifted an eyebrow. "You don't miss much, do you?"

"You've been at each other's throats for years."

"If Murray wants to retire that's up to him," Davis said. "He won't fight me."

"You must know more about him than I do."

"That's right." Davis held out his hand. "Glad you dropped by, Shaffer."

I nodded and shook his hand. "The King is dead, long live the King," I said, and made my way out into the clear air again.

From a phone booth I called the Mayor's home. A man answered. I identified myself and asked to speak with Mrs. Stryder.

"She's under sedation, Mr. Shaeffer," the voice informed me.

"Shaffer," I corrected. "Who're you?"

"Her doctor. Can I help you?"

"I'm interested in her reaction to her husband's death."

"She's upset over it, of course."

He sounded a bit testy. "This has been a great shock to her."

"How soon, doctor, do you think she'll be available for comment?"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't disturb her until tomorrow."

"Are you the family physician?"

"Yes. My name is Morrison. Harlan Morrison."

"Could you tell me if overwork had anything to do with the Mayor's stroke?"

"Hardly. He thrived on work. These things can't be predicted. Amputees are always in some circulatory danger. I'm sorry he's dead—he played an excellent game of chess."

*Dr. Harlan Morrison, frequent chess partner and family physician,* I jotted, *stated yesterday afternoon that . . .*

I dialed Homicide and asked for Murphy. He was out, so I drove over to the Clough Mortuary where Stryder's body was being prepared for tomorrow's funeral, figuring that I could kill three birds with one stone.

The Coroner himself was busy in the back, so I asked his assistant, Frank Peterson, to fill me in on details of the service. They were expecting at least five hundred people, he said, and would be prepared for an additional thousand. The remains could be viewed that evening at the Clough Chapel and would be transferred to First Presbyterian at ten tomorrow morning. Floral tributes were already overflowing the mortuary's capacity and the florists' association had been asked to make all additional deliveries to the church.

"Donations to a paraplegic foundation might be more in order," I suggested.

Peterson looked at me as if I'd said something dirty. I remembered that he owned half-interest in a greenhouse.

Clough appeared and invited me into a consultation room. He was a small man with liquid brown eyes which belied rumors I'd heard of a somewhat vindictive nature. Although Clough was a county official, he'd had Stryder's personal endorsement, which carried weight, as eighty percent of the county's population lived within the city limits. It seemed likely that Davis' 'deal' with the Police Commissioner might well concern the Commissioner's dream of replacing the Coroner with a police pathologist.

I decided to sound Bob Clough out on it.

"Looks like a busy day," I observed, sitting in a friendly chair.

"Hectic," Clough fumed. "Absolutely hectic. Two operators out sick, the biggest funeral of the year on a rush order, my ulcer's in a state of seige and now I'm blessed with newspaper reporters."

"I'm interested in politics today, Bob. There's a rumor in City Hall that a shakeup may be in the

offing and that the Coroner's Office might get the ax."

Clough gnawed his lip and stared at the ceiling. "Who's behind it this time, Davis? Norris? Richards?"

"An informed source."

The Coroner nodded. "The issue was raised about six years ago —by Councilman Vincent. He argued that Fallbrook should have a Police Medical Examiner. Morticians should not be Coroners, it's too much of a political plum. Actually, Shaffer, not many mortuaries want the City's business. There's no profit; very often it's a loss. Therefore, my office assigns a quota of indigent cases to each of the eight mortuaries in the city. The fee for autopsies is again minimal. We all share, in rotation. And nobody gets rich."

"That isn't the issue, Bob," I said. "The modern approach is to make the Coroner's duties an official part of the Police Department, with a licensed pathologist as M.E., instead of a politically elected Coroner who may not know Hippocrates from a hole in the ground."

"I," Clough snapped, "am fully capable of performing an autopsy and I'm well up on forensic medicine, although I'm not a certified pathologist. My findings, many times, have been at variance with those of the attending physicians, and as a matter of professional ethics I would insist that more death certificates be amended if it weren't for all the red tape involved."

"Oh? Doctors make that many mistakes?"

"I didn't say that. But I've seen evidence of negligence and twice I've testified in suits for malpractice. I belong to no medical societies and therefore cannot be pressured into covering up mistakes."

"Good point. But regarding the move to replace you—and considering that Stryder was the one who squelched it before— will it take place now that he's dead?"

"Officially, I'm aware of no such movement. Personally, I hope there is one. I'd be much better off devoting my full time to my own business. The city is money ahead with the present system and the services provided are pretty adequate."

"One more question, Bob. I've tried to get through to Mrs. Stryder but she'd under sedation. What was her reaction last night?"

"She wanted to get everything over with as quickly as possible, and insisted on tomorrow for the funeral. She was stunned by Phil's death, of course."

"They didn't get along too well, I hear."

Clough frowned. "I've never been exactly a crony so I wouldn't know. I'm not as impressed by big shots as I ought to be. They all look alike in the end."

## V

IT WAS NOON, and I had three hours in which to get my story in to Pritch. I called Homicide again. This time Murphy was in.

"Had lunch yet, Murph?"

"You buying?"

"As long as you fill me in on Vice and Organized Crime in Fallbrook while we eat."

Murphy was rather young to be in charge of Homicide, but his ability more than made up for it. I liked him.

We met ten minutes later at the *Celestial Grill*. After comparing our fortune cookie readings, we discussed the abilities of Benjamin Norris as a vice crusader.

"What he'll never learn," Murphy opined, "is that there's a big difference between vice, crime, and corruption. To him, all sins are equal. That's fine for an opinion but our legal system won't stand for it. He's had fun nosing around and he's made a list of indiscreet sinners but not much will come of it."

"Have you crossed horns with our Coroner?" I inquired.

"Who hasn't? Clough's rather jealous of his authority. Refuses to be 'pushed around by the cops.' Yes, we've tangled a time or two. Why?"

"With Stryder gone you may be getting yourself a medical examiner."

Murphy's smile was seraphic.

"You also," I added, "may have to put up with a vice clean-up. Davis claims he's got the Police Commissioner's ear for action on the Norris report."

"I think I'd rather keep the Coroner," Murphy said. "The department has enough to do without having to raid private poker games and confiscate dirty books —which is what I'll bet this boils down to."

I laughed. "You seem to have about as much use for Norris as I have."

"He came in about a month ago," Murphy recalled, "looking for proof of his pet theory that Art Vincent was murdered. I handled that investigation myself, Shaffer. We stripped the wreck but didn't find a thing out of order. Norris as much as accused me of concealing evidence. He's convinced the Mafia bumped Vincent off. I booted him out."

"That may have been a mistake."

"Politically? Perhaps, but I don't think so."

We finished lunch. Murphy promised to let me know if anything interesting should filter down from above, and I hurried back to the *Bulletin*.

As far as the council was concerned, Davis was the obvious choice to fill Stryder's shoes. There were, in addition, seven rather colorless pawns, championed mainly by the neighborhood weeklies and

ethnic or religious publications.—Although each had had Stryder's endorsement, none was important enough to bother with.

I regretted not having talked with the widow, but her doctor's statement and the information I'd got from the Coroner would cover me in that area.

It took me an hour to sort out the main story, and another thirty minutes to write it. I knocked out a couple of side-pieces for good measure—one on the Norris report, the other a schmaltzy thing about the funeral in which I used up the quotes I'd collected—and gave it all to Pritch. Then I told him I planned to attend the council meeting Monday night and the funeral Saturday.

"Fine," he said. "This stuff is pretty good, but I have the feeling something's missing."

"Yeah," I agreed. "But I don't know what it is. I shall go out right now and drink it over."

Two beers later I was still worrying about it. Something was missing. Was it a question I'd neglected to ask? Was it something I'd refused to look for?

The Mayor was dead, of a stroke suffered during a fireworks display at McKinley High football field. Jim Davis would probably become Mayor *Pro Tem* because of it. Stryder's faithful secretary had cheered. Clough and several others might lose their jobs. Clough didn't care. Richards was ready to go into industry. Bronstein was looking forward to private law practice again. Norris was on a fence, his fanatic reformism blinding him to his own lack of political skill.

"Wouldn't it be interesting," Cathy Rogers had said, "if someone had killed him?"

I was unable to make the leap of logic required for that to make sense. Murder in front of five thousand people is rather difficult to accomplish, even in total darkness.

Anyone trying to kill Phil Stryder could certainly find a dozen better, safer, surer opportunities than at the fireworks display.

Murder was ridiculous.

It was simply coincidence that the people who benefited most from his death were within ten feet of him when it happened.

As it was only four-thirty, I paid for my beers and went back to the *Bulletin,* hoping to find Cathy Rogers in the P.R. department. She'd gone home early, I was told.

I drove to her apartment but there was no trace of her. I considered stopping somewhere for dinner but I wanted to change first, so I went home.

Cathy was waiting for me there. She looked worried.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"May I come in?"

"Sure. What brings you here, honey?"

"Something I didn't tell you last night. Since it's your story I wanted to talk to you first before I went to the police. I tried to catch you at the paper but you'd gone."

I unlocked the door and ushered her inside.

"Mayor Stryder was murdered," she announced quietly.

"You saw it happen?"

She shook her head. "No, but I did see the murder weapon, Ted. It's a hatpin, a very long hatpin and it belongs to Mrs. Stryder."

"Listen, honey," I began, patiently, "it would be pretty hard to kill a man with a hatpin in the dark without leaving any traces for the Coroner to discover."

"In the ear?" she ventured. "It would be a very small wound."

I laughed. "If your victim is obliging enough to hold still while you fumble in the darkness for his ear."

"She might have been whispering to him."

"What makes you so sure it was his wife?"

"A hatpin isn't exactly a man's weapon. She was the only woman on the platform. There's the insurance angle, too. She'll get fifty thousand dollars."

"Where'd you find this out?"

Cathy blushed. "A friend of mine is an insurance broker. I had him ask around."

Thelma White, I recalled, had said it was the best thing that could have happened to June Stryder. "Where's this deadly little hatpin now?"

"It should be in the ground on the football field, where I left it. I don't know if I'd be able to find it again, though."

"How'd you find it in the first place?"

"I was trying to fold up the blanket," she explained, "and the hatpin was stuck through an edge of it, pinning it to the ground. I pulled it out to see what it was and stuck it back in the dirt so nobody'd get hurt by it. It wasn't till after we'd left that I wondered if it could have been used to kill the Mayor."

"Why didn't you tell me this last night?" I made no attempt to hide my irritation.

Cathy looked away from me. "I —I guess I didn't want to get involved."

"Some people watch muggings

and murders without lifting a finger," I said caustically.

"I deserved that. Anyway, it was too late to go looking for it then. And it seemed like awfully flimsy evidence to take to the police, especially when I didn't have the hatpin."

There was no percentage in bawling her out. "Was there blood on it?"

"I don't know. I didn't notice any. It could have been wiped off, though."

I had to agree—it was awfully flimsy evidence. I tried to put myself in Murphy's shoes, and decided he'd need something more concrete to go on.

"The Coroner says Stryder died of a stroke. I suppose a hatpin in the brain could produce the same effect, and Clough might miss it if he didn't know what to look for." I checked my watch. "The body will be cremated in about twenty-four hours and Clough goes strictly by the book. We've got to get that hatpin."

"If I'd only had sense enough to hang onto it!" she wailed.

"The blanket," I said. "It was pushed through the blanket. Think you can find the hole?"

"I suppose so. Why?"

"If there's human blood on it I can probably talk the cops into searching for the hatpin."

Cathy frowned. "You are the laziest reporter I've ever met," she said.

## VI

I GOT THE blanket from the car and we examined it under a bright light. It took us five minutes to find the puncture. There was a tiny brown stain at one edge of it.

"Morrison," I said. "Harlan Morrison."

Cathy looked at me blankly.

"Stryder's doctor. He'd have a record of the Mayor's blood type."

Dr. Morrison's answering service promised to have him call me. I told Cathy to open us a pair of beers and dialed Homicide. Fortunately, Murphy was still in.

"Sorry, Ted," he said, "but I haven't heard a thing yet. It's too early."

"I'm not calling about that," I told him. "I'm working on something else and I need help. I've got a blanket which may or may not have a blood spot on it and I want it analyzed, no questions asked. Can you get it done for me?"

"I suppose so. Want to tell me why?"

"Not yet. I've got a theory which may be way out in left field. If it pans out I'll let you in on it. How soon can your lab give me a report?"

"Monday noon," the detective said.

"Too late. I need it tomorrow morning."

Murphy hesitated, but not long. "All right, bring it over. I'll get someone on it right away."

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

I hung up and filled Cathy in on what to tell Dr. Morrison in case he called while I was out. She volunteered to have dinner going by the time I got back.

"Great!" I said. "There ought to be a couple of steaks in the freezer, and the pantry's full. I'll be back in forty-five minutes." I kissed her and departed.

Murphy was waiting for me when I lugged the blanket in. I pointed out the hole and watched him mark it for the lab.

"Just what are you trying to establish?" he asked.

"Whether or not a crime has been committed," I said. "If I tell you about it now you might talk me out of it—but if the lab comes up with the right blood type I'll tell everything. If it's just part of a Hershey bar I'll forget it."

"Want me to call you when I get the report?"

"Definitely. I'll be at home. I'd love to hang around and chew the fat, but my date wouldn't appreciate it if I'm late to dinner."

When I returned to the apartment it smelled like a good French restaurant. Cathy sat me down, peeled me a brew and informed me that Dr. Morrison had not called. "We'll eat in about fifteen minutes," she announced.

I tried Morrison's answering service again; the girl expected him to call in momentarily. I finished my beer and Cathy put Beef Stroganoff, steamed rice and string beans in front of me.

"You're a good cook, too," I observed, inhaling appreciatively.

I grinned. "I wasn't offering you one."

The phone rang. It was Dr. Morrison.

"You're the reporter who talked to me earlier today when you were trying to get in touch with Mrs. Stryder, aren't you?"

"That's right," I said. "Do you have a record of Phil Stryder's blood type?"

"Why?"

"Is it classified information?"

"It's an unusual request," he said testily.

"I'm working with the police department on this," I said. "Do you have the information?"

"Yes, but not for the newspapers. If you have some crazy notion that Phil Stryder was murdered, forget it."

"You sound as if you know more than I do, doctor."

"I know the way newspapers operate. My concern is for my patient. June Stryder is in a severe state of shock."

"She may have killed her husband, doctor," I said. "If you won't give the information to me, I suggest you call Chief of Detectives John Corcoran Murphy, Homicide Division, and talk to him."

Morrison was silent for a mo-

ment. "You're serious about this," he said.

"Very. Well, doctor?"

"His blood type was AB. He was forty-four years old and in excellent physical condition. It seems highly improbable that he died of a stroke."

"Thank you, doctor. I have a feeling Chief Murphy will ask you to sign a statement to that effect tomorrow."

I hung up and concentrated once more on my dinner.

"Did he tell you the blood type?" Cathy inquired anxiously.

"Yep," I relied, dipping some French bread in the gravy.

"What do we do now?"

"Finish our dinner," I informed her. "It's delicious."

"I can't. I'm too nervous."

"Are you sitting on something else you should have told me?"

She shook her head.

"Then relax and eat."

She picked up her fork. "I don't know if it's important or not—"

"Spill," I invited.

"Who's Thelma White?"

"Stryder's secretary."

"Oh. Well, she gets fifty thousand dollars, too."

"That's interesting. Eat."

"Shouldn't we do something about it?"

"After dinner," I assured her.

Twenty minutes later Cathy cleared our empty plates away and, at my insistance, brought in the coffee.

"I thought you said we'd do something after dinner," she protested.

"We could always make love," I observed, "but I'm expecting a visitor. Better get out another cup."

Moments later the doorbell chimed. I answered it.

"Murph!" I exclaimed. "What a pleasant surprise. You missed dinner but I trust you'll join us for dessert?"

"Surprise, hell," he growled. "Do you mind telling me what this is all about, Shaffer?"

"That depends on what your lab found on my blanket. This is Cathy Rogers, an excellent cook. Cathy, Chief of Detectives John Corcoran Murphy."

Murph acknowledged the introduction, then turned to me. "Miss Rogers in on this?"

"From the start," I assured him. "I trust it was human blood, type AB?"

The detective nodded. "And earwax."

"Score one for Miss Rogers," I said. "Sit down, Murph. After I tell you what we know and a little of what we suspect, you might like to have a look at the corpse. If our obstinate friend, Clough, will let you anywhere near it, that is."

Over coffee and dessert I told him about the hatpin, how it was found, where it presumably came from and where it was now. I listed the people on the platform and detailed the benefits, financial and

political, accruing to my chief two suspects.

I discussed the apparent effect of Stryder's death on the others present. It took a surprisingly short time to cover the material, including Dr. Morrison's opinion that a stroke was unlikely.

"I see," Murphy mused, looking a bit dazed. "Everyone on the platform had the opportunity but only two of them had any apparent motive. Motive isn't really as important as ability, though—and I guess they'd all be capable of murder."

"You're not even sure a murder's been committed yet," I pointed out.

"True," the detective agreed. "But an autopsy would establish that easily enough. I suppose you'll want to tag along while I have a look at the body. I may need you, anyway, to help me convince the Coroner he ought to do an autopsy."

"My pleasure," I assured him. "Cathy?"

She hesitated.

"What's the matter?"

"Well—but isn't the Coroner a suspect?" she asked. "You said motive doesn't count as much as opportunity and ability, and he was on the platform, too."

"Score two for Miss Rogers," I said.

"Three," Murphy corrected. "She found the hatpin."

"Since Clough is a suspect you'll have to have someone else do the autopsy."

"That can be arranged," Murphy assured me. "Let's see how we make out at the funeral parlor."

## VII

WHEN WE ARRIVED at the Clough Mortuary, the Coroner was out. Peterson, his florally-oriented assistant, led us to a softly-lit 'slumber room' where the mayor's body lay. There was a line of citizens filing past, paying their last respects.

"Mr. Peterson," Murphy said, "you'll have to get these people out of here."

Peterson bristled indignantly. "For heaven's sake, why?"

"I have a reasonable suspicion that Mayor Stryder was murdered. An autopsy is required, immediately. Anyone here who can do it?"

Peterson shook his head. "Mr. Clough does them himself."

"Get him on the phone," Murphy directed.

There was no answer at the Clough residence.

"All right," Murphy announced. "I'll make arrangements to have the body picked up within the hour."

"I can't allow that!" Peterson protested. "Without specific instructions from the Coroner I couldn't possible release the body."

He spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"Mr. Peterson," I said. "Would it be good for business if the *Bulletin* informed its readers that you'd obstructed the course of justice?"

"That's Mr. Clough's decision to make, not mine," he replied. "Now if you gentlemen had a court order—"

"This is Friday night," I reminded him. "Stryder's to be cremated tomorrow."

"I simply don't have the authority," Peterson persisted. "Furthermore, I can't imagine what you expect the autopsy to show."

"Poison," Murphy said. "Come on, there's no point in our sticking around here."

Once we were back in the car, Cathy looked at Murphy and asked, "Poison?"

"When I get cooperation, I give it," the detective said.

"You've given me a way to cover this story without tipping off the killer," I told him. "I'll say an investigation is underway based upon an anonymous tip that the Mayor was poisoned. It might force Clough to authorize an independent autopsy."

Murphy frowned at me. "That's a good idea—in case I can't get a court order tonight."

"It won't hurt even if you do."

I called Howdy Jackson and dictated five short paragraphs.

"Shaffer," he said patiently when I'd finished, "do you do these things to me on purpose?"

"Have fun with the front page, Howdy," I told him and hung up.

Then I took Cathy to my apartment. Murphy had promised to call us if there were any further developments. We stayed up far into the night, discussing motives.

Saturday morning dawned bright and cheerful, two attributes for which I will not give Mother Nature credit, unless the sunny disposition and culinary genius of my strawberry blonde can be traced to the matriarch of creation. With my coffee was Howdy's headline: MURDER HINTED IN MAYOR'S DEATH. Following it was a gourmet's delight invented by Miss Rogers herself, which proved to be every bit as tasty as its creator.

I was complimenting her on it when the phone rang. Cathy handed me the instrument, saying, "It's Chief Murphy."

"Morning, Murph," I yawned. "Did our headline get results?"

"Not what we expected," he said. "I still haven't found Clough, but I'll have a court order in half an hour. There's a new development, though. Just after your paper came out Councilman Norris got a threatening phone call. A man's voice said, 'Lay off or what happened to Stryder will happen to you.' "

I whistled softly. "What does Norris have to say?"

"I didn't talk with him. I got it from the Police Commissioner—Norris called him direct." Murphy paused. "I've lined up a Mercy Hospital pathologist to do the autopsy. It's nine o'clock now. Can you meet me at the mortuary in forty-five minutes?"

"Love to," I assured him.

While Cathy cleaned up the breakfast remains I tried to get Norris on the phone, but it was reported out of order. I grinned and

tried another number, interrupting Murray Bronstein at breakfast.

"Murray," I inquired, "have you read the Norris report yet?"

"Yes."

"What's in it?"

"I'm afraid I can't release that information until I present it to the Council Monday night."

"Have you seen this morning's *Bulletin?*"

"No. Why?"

"The police received a tip that Stryder was murdered. I printed it," I explained. "Also in the paper was a quote from Norris that his report would blow the lid off. Shortly after the paper hit the streets Norris got a threatening phone call. What I want to know is this: does the report endanger any of his fellow councilmen?"

Bronstein was silent for a moment. "There are lots of accusations, Ted. How valid they are is hard to tell. There's only one present council member named, though—in an accusation of bribery."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Let me guess. Either Jim Davis or Tom Richards."

"Sorry, Shaffer."

I took a shot in the dark. "Look, Murray, the Mayor's dead—you don't have to be afraid of him now. Whatever he had on you he took with him."

Bronstein paused a moment, then said, "Richards."

"Has he seen the report?"

"It's hard to keep secrets in City Hall. The only one I've ever seen who could do it was Stryder himself—that was his specialty. My eggs are cold, Shaffer, and so are my feet right now, so I hope you'll excuse me."

I thanked him, then Cathy and I drove to the mortuary, arriving there just as Murphy pulled up, brandishing a court order.

I told him of my talk with Bronstein, concluding, "And Richards was on the platform with Stryder when he died."

"So were three other people,"

Murphy reminded me. "Once we have proof of murder, I'm going to question all of them—including the Coroner."

"That ought to be fun."

"Has it occurred to you, Shaffer, that the killer may not have been on the platform at all, except long enough to do the job? You could have done it yourself."

I grinned. "I was with Cathy from the time the lights went out till they came on again."

"No you weren't, Ted," Cathy said helpfully. "You left me for a minute to turn your tape recorder off."

"Thanks heaps," I said.

The three of us went inside to claim the Mayor's body.

It was gone.

## VIII

WE FOUND IT twenty minutes later at First Presbyterian Church. With it were the Coroner, Reverend Hamilton and a line of curiosity-seeking mourners queued up halfway down the block. Clough read the court order.

"This is ridiculous!" he snorted. "I attended the body myself and there was absolutely nothing out of order."

"Judge Alexander seems to think differently."

"Just what do you propose to do?" Clough inquired testily. "Perform an autopsy between now and two o'clock? Do you think you can have it back here in time and in condition for the service? This is the most asinine thing I've ever heard of!"

"May I quote you on that?" I asked.

He shot me a startled look, and calmed down. "It's certainly not my intention to obstruct justice, even though I think you're on a wild goose chase. I assure you, if there is any poison in the remains it will still be there after the funeral."

"So?" Murphy countered.

"I'll cooperate in the fullest, but I must ask you to cooperate with me in return. Have some respect for the feelings of the widow. A funeral is a solemn occasion, and I see no sense in disrupting it."

Reverend Hamilton endorsed this sentiment, but Clough cut him short and turned to me. "You, Mr. Shaffer—I think your tactics in this morning's paper were entirely uncalled for. This crowd is not here to pay respects to the dead but to get a free look at a so-called murder victim."

"You refuse to admit you might have made a mistake?" I asked. "That you might have overlooked something because you weren't specifically looking for traces of murder?"

"It's always possible, of course," Clough agreed. "But highly improbable."

Murphy had been thinking it over. Now he said, "All right, Cor-

oner. I'll wait until after the funeral."

Clough nodded curtly. "The service begins here, there's the procession to the cemetery, and the concluding service is at the mausoleum. Once the family has departed, you may have the body."

"Agreed," Murphy said. "What time will it be then?"

"Four-thirty, at the latest."

Murphy offered to buy my lunch but I declined. "I've got some work to do between now and two o'clock, so if you'll excuse me I'll get at it. Cathy, you want to keep John Corcoran company? I promise not to be jealous."

We agreed to meet again at the church at two and I headed back for the *Bulletin*. As it wasn't far out of the way, I drove first to the Stryder residence, parked and rang the doorbell.

Thelma White opened the door.

She looked at me blankly for a moment, then stepped nimbly out on to the porch beside me, pulling the door to behind her.

"Actually," I said gently, "I came here to talk to Mrs. Stryder."

"I'm afraid you can't, Ted. June's pretty much under the weather. The doctor's with her right now, trying to get her in shape to attend the funeral."

I nodded. "Grief hits pretty hard, sometimes."

The late Mayor's secretary smiled crookedly. "Grief? Maybe it is. She's plastered. She's been drinking pretty steadily since Phil died. You print that and I'll sue," she warned.

I grinned and cocked my eyebrows. "Celebrating?"

"You've got a nasty little mind, Shaffer," she said frostily.

"Just recalling our conversation yesterday," I told her. "A lot's happened since then, Thelma."

Thelma nodded. "Thank God she hasn't seen the papers. Is that actually true? The poison theory, I mean?"

"There's an investigation underway," I assured her. "I'm surprised you haven't been contacted."

"Oh? And am I a suspect?"

I shrugged. "Until they catch who did it, honey, you may have trouble collecting your fifty grand."

"My what? Shaffer, are you drunk, too?"

"You don't know about it?"

Thelma shook her head.

"I understand you're an insurance beneficiary to the tune of fifty thousand dollars."

It was not at all like Thelma White to gape, but gape she did.

"You're kidding!" she exclaimed. "You must be! Fifty thousand bucks! Talk about heaping coals of fire on my head—if that isn't just like the Great White Father. He always did have to have the last laugh."

"Some joke. But don't worry about it unless you killed him."

Thelma sobered instantly. "Do they think June did it?"

"I don't know what they think, yet. You sure I can't see her?"

"It's going to be a job getting her sober enough to walk into the church this afternoon," she said, "much less answer you coherently."

"All right," I said. "See you at the funeral."

## IX

I DROVE THOUGHTFULLY back to the *Bulletin,* not much wiser than I'd been before. Parts of the puzzle were still missing. For one thing, that phone call to Benjamin Norris bothered me. "Lay off or what happened to Stryder will happen to you." A man's voice, Murphy had said. That eliminated both Mrs. Stryder and Thelma, but opened up several possibilities.

Norris was accusing Richards of accepting bribes, according to Bronstein. It would help if I knew who had been on the bribing end. Richards had been a realtor once; now he talked of going into 'industry.'

Davis, however, was industry's spokesman, unless he'd sold out to somebody else. But Davis had told me he did not fear the Norris report. Murray Bronstein was his avowed enemy—it didn't figure that Murray would cover up for Davis. Supposedly, Bronstein was the only one who'd seen the report, although he'd added that it's hard to keep a secret in City Hall.

I began to wonder if there had actually been a threatening phone call in the first place.

Once back at the paper, I checked several files out of the morgue and spent better than an hour sorting out the political cross currents. I approached the problem from several different angles, even going so far as to postulate that if the phone threat was legitimate there might be more than one murder involved.

Bumping off political opponents, I reasoned, might get to be a habit.

That brought me to Art Vincent, and Norris' wild rantings about the Mafia having bumped him off. According to the clippings, Vincent had died of internal injuries suffered in an auto accident on a high-speed stretch of freeway at about two o'clock in the morning. His car had gone out of control. He'd been driving home from a late conference with the Mayor, and police speculated that he'd gone to sleep at the wheel.

As a murder method it was lousy. Even if the car had been tampered with—and Murphy assured me it hadn't—there were still too many things which could go wrong. There'd be no way to guarantee the victim would die or even be seriously injured. The wreck had teen meticulously examined and everyone but Norris was satisfied with the verdict of accidental death.

So much for that.

I decided that the threatening call had existed only in the imagination of Benjamin Norris. Either that, or the murderer was attempting to lay a smoke screen, knowing, as he must, of Norris' Mafia theory. He didn't even have to be the killer himself. A worried confederate could have made the call.

I put Mrs. Stryder back on my suspect list. Even so, my list was lousy. Murphy had been right. There was no guarantee that the killer had stayed on the platform. Cathy couldn't even swear positively that the hatpin belonged to Mrs. Stryder. She'd drawn that conclusion merely because the widow had been wearing a big floppy hat of the sort which is often held in place with hatpins. Even so, anyone could have swiped the pin in the darkness.

The fact that it was a woman's weapon didn't mean anything either. Tom Richards, Jim Davis or Bob Clough could have spotted the weapon, seized the opportunity and done the deed—if given a strong enough motive.

Afterwards, the killer had jumped off the platform and shoved the pin in the ground, burying it, probably stamping on it to make sure it was in deep. But in failed to notice that it pierced the edge of a blanket on its way into the ground.

I asked myself why. Then, satisfied with my answer, I returned to the church. Murphy and my strawberry blonde were waiting just outside the main entrance.

I barely had time to inform them that Telma and Dr. Morrison had shielded Mrs. Stryder from the potentially disturbing knowledge that murder was suspected when the doctor's car arrived.

Thelma helped the widow out and the three of them came cautiously to the entrance to the church, where Clough waited in his role of funeral director.

The Coroner took June's hand and patted it comfortingly. She clung to him. Through the thick, black, widow's veil, her voice came clearly: "Is he really dead, Bob? You're quite sure he's dead?"

Clough's mask of solemnity darkened.

"Please, Mrs. Stryder," Dr. Morrison said. Thelma stood by, looking uncomfortable.

There was still some fifteen minutes to go before the funeral was to begin, but the church was already packed. Clough detoured the widow and her party to a side entrance reserved for immediate family and close friends. Murphy, Cathy and I tagged along.

Clough had seated the city officials in the 'friends of the family' section, a semi-enclosed area at one side of the chancel. A forgotten music rack indicated that this alcove was intended for the church choir.

Tom Richards and Jim Davis rose from their seats as the widow

entered, their faces arranged in attitudes of grief which I was sure neither of them felt.

Mrs. Stryder seemed to read their expressions correctly, too, for she looked at them for a moment and then exclaimed: "Why do you all look so sad? I thought you'd be happy! He's gone, after all. He's dead. And I did try to make you all happy." She laughed.

Thelma clutched the woman's arm. "Please, June, watch what you say! Don't make a scene."

"Don't make a scene," the widow repeated. "Phil wouldn't like that, would he?"

From out front came organ music, loudly played, in an apparent attempt to override the disturbance in the choir loft. At the same time the pastor appeared, a worried frown on his face.

"Reverend Hamilton!" Mrs. Stryder exclaimed warmly. "How are you? Isn't it amazing what prayer can do? All of us here have been praying for this day, haven't we?" She looked around, her gaze encompassing them all.

"Mrs. Stryder, please," Dr. Morrison remonstrated. "Control yourself."

"Oh, but you see, Doctor," she caroled, "I don't know how. That was Phil's job—controlling things —and people. But he's gone now, he's dead."

"My dear," the minister began, "I realize this is a trying time, but you must face up."

The widow laughed. It began as a laugh, anyway, but it turned into a giggle of delight. Then she stopped and stared at the speechless assembly.

"Don't be afraid," she said. "You don't have to be afraid any more. No one has seen his private papers." She paused, then added significantly, "Except me."

"Mrs. Stryder," Morrison said, reaching for her.

She shrugged him off. "You'll have to treat me nicely, now, won't you?" She looked directly at Norris. "Don't fret so about it, Benny dear, I won't expose you. You're safe."

"The photographs!" Norris blurted. "Where are the photographs?"

Ignoring Norris, the widow lifted her veil and peered owlishly at Richards. "And you, Mr. City Treasurer. You don't have a thing to worry about now."

"I don't know what this woman is talking about!" Tom Richards blustered.

June Stryder giggled and hugged herself. "Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking—" she said, and stopped as the ornate, flower-strewn casket caught her eye. "How nice," she breathed. "He didn't interrupt me. Let's get it over with, Reverend. Let's hurry up and get the bastard buried."

Cathy, at my side, gasped.

"No, no, no," the widow continued. "That's not right. We're burn-

ing him. I've always thought he ought to burn." The veil fell across her face again. Annoyed, she brushed at it, then tugged the hat from her head, or attempted to, anyway. Smiling crookedly, she reached up and extracted a long, silver hatpin, then removed the hat.

From the corner of my eye I could see Murphy stiffen. His attention was riveted to the widow. She held the hatpin between thumb and forefinger.

"Bothersome little things, aren't they?" she asked, her gaze flicking from one member of the group to another. "But handy in an emergency, I hear."

Morrison took her firmly by the arm. "You're overwrought," he said, steering her adroitly towards the exit. "May we use your study, Reverend?"

"Certainly," he responded.

Murphy started to protest, then changed his mind. "Mr. Clough, Mr. Richards, Mr. Davis—would you join us, please?"

Bending close to Cathy, I asked, "Is that the hatpin?"

"No," she said.

"Come along, Shaffer, you're in on this," Murphy said, and we appended ourselves to the procession headed for the pastor's study.

## X

ONCE THE DOOR was closed behind us, June Stryder looked

around at everybody. Seeing us she inquired, "Who are these people?"

Clough introduced us: "Detective Murphy, Mr. Shaffer from the *Bulletin,* and—?"

"Miss Rogers, also of the *Bulletin,*" I provided.

"Detectives! Reporters! How very, very nice!" the widow exclaimed.

Dr. Morrison dumped a pink pill from a small plastic vial into the palm of his hand. "Would you get Mrs. Stryder a glass of water, Miss Rogers?" he asked.

"No more pills, doctor!" June Stryder said firmly. "I feel wonderful. I haven't had so much attention in years. But why the police?"

Murphy extracted the folded court order from his pocket. "The department wants an independent autopsy performed. Cremation will have to be postponed."

"I won't let you," she snapped. "What do you expect to prove, anyway?"

"I think you know that, Mrs. Stryder," Murphy said, looking pointedly at the hatpin.

She glanced down at it, then placed it carefully on the desk. "How did you find out?" she said quietly.

"June!" Dr. Morrison said sharply.

"Quiet, Harlan," she commanded. "I want to know how the police found out about this. Did you tell them, Mr. Clough?"

"Mrs. Stryder," Murphy said, "it is my duty to warn you that anything you say may be held in evidence against you."

"Murph," I said, "you don't want to arrest her."

"Are you nuts?" he exploded. "I'm handing you the story you came here to get and you tell me not to arrest her?"

I shook my head. "Wrong story, Murph. Just because she knows how her husband was killed is no sign that she did it. There were four other people who knew—you, Cathy and me—plus the killer. And since the killer tried to hide the weapon instead of disappearing with it, it has to be one of the four people on the platform."

"What in hell are you talking about?" Jim Davis demanded. "I certainly didn't poison Phil Stryder!"

"Nobody did. And there wasn't an anonymous tip to the police, either, but the killer thought there was. I believe our killer thought that Benjamin Norris made that anonymous call, knowing that Norris was bright enough to realize the cops wouldn't take him seriously if he made the charge in person. That's Ben's trouble—he's made so many wild charges in the past that nobody takes him seriously. But the law of averages is with a man like that. Every so often he gets lucky and hits a sore spot."

I turned to Davis. "You're aware of what's in the Norris report, aren't you, Councilman?"

"Of course I am."

"I'm glad you said that, because for a while I thought it was you. But, as you told me yesterday, there's nothing in there for you to be afraid of. I should have known then that you'd seen the report, one way or another."

"Would you mind telling us," Clough said stiffly, "just how you think Phil Stryder was killed?"

"Not at all, Coroner," I said. "It was a hatpin in the brain. Small wound, easy to overlook."

"Preposterous!" Clough fumed. "I suppose that's the hatpin that did it, there on the table."

"No, not that one. Mrs. Stryder, when did you realize the hatpin was missing?"

"As soon as I got home," the widow responded. "I'd had two pins in my hat that day. We'd gone

to a picnic where Phil spoke, then we had dinner out and came straight to the fireworks display. I knew the hatpin was gone when I got home and I figured someone had used it to kill him with."

Murphy frowned at the woman. "Why didn't you report it to the police?"

"That would have been an awfully ungrateful thing for me to do, don't you think?" she said, smiling brightly.

"But your curiosity got the better of you," I said. "You staged that demonstration a few minutes ago, just so you could find out who did it, right?"

"Yes. But I still don't know."

"Let's try the process of elimination, then," I suggested. "Obviously, you didn't kill your husband. You had plenty of motive, but too many opportunities—much better opportunities."

"So?" Murphy challenged.

"She might have wanted to, but I don't think she was capable of it. Besides, she'd have stuck the weapon back where she got it, which the murderer obviously didn't."

Mrs. Stryder lifted shaking hands to her face. "You don't know how much I wanted to, Mr. Shaffer," she said brokenly.

"All right," Murphy agreed, "so we've narrowed it down to three people then—Davis, Richards and Clough. Where do we go from here?"

"Who discovered the Mayor was dead?" I asked.

"I did," Jim Davis responded promptly. "I spoke to him and he didn't answer."

"And you exclaimed, 'Good Lord, he's dead!' "

"That's right."

I turned to the Coroner. "What did you do when you heard this?" I asked.

"I went to him, of course," Clough replied.

"Tom?" I inquired.

Richards shrugged. "June screamed—I went to her to see if I could help. She seemed awfully upset."

"You went to her immediately?"

"Yes."

"I'll vouch for that," Davis said.

"All right. Tom Richards is not our man," I announced. "He wasn't worried about having to cover up any possible blood that he hadn't been able to see in the darkness earlier."

Davis grinned. "That leaves only me and Clough. Bob, did you kill him?"

"This is preposterous!" Clough exploded. "I've seen no proof that murder's been committed, but if it was and if I was guilty, would I be fool enough to release the body for an independent autopsy?"

"As long as you thought the pathologist would be looking for poison in the man's stomach, you'd have nothing to fear. I doubt the ears would be examined. And it

took a court order to get you to agree to our taking the body."

I turned to Murphy. "While we're examining cadavers, Murph, it might not be a bad idea to exhume Art Vincent."

"Wait a minute!" Murphy said. "What does Vincent's body have to do with it?"

"Dig it up and you'll find out."

"Never mind. I'll save you the trouble," Clough said wearily. "I did the autopsy on Vincent, but I never released all my findings. He was murdered."

"Then it was you who called Councilman Norris last night and threatened him."

Clough nodded. "I suppose I shouldn't have done that," he said.

"What did the phone call have to do with it?" Murphy demanded grimly.

"Benjamin Norris," I explained, "had been asking questions in a number of different areas, including an inquiry about Vincent's death. Davis knew the contents of the report and stated that he had no fear of it. There was nothing in there that could injure him.

"But Clough didn't know what to expect when he read my story that it would 'blow the lid off.' He couldn't afford to have the investigation re-opened, because it might come out that he'd filed a phony autopsy report. Corret me if I'm wrong, Bob. Originally you didn't dare report your findings, right?"

Clough nodded, his fingers nervously peeling the wrapper from an antacid tablet.

"What did he have on you?" I asked.

"It hardly matters now," Clough muttered.

"Someone was blackmailing you?" Murphy demanded. "Who?"

"Stryder," I said. "Is that right, Bob?"

Clough's smile was bleak. "I don't know if I could prove he did it, but no one else could have killed so ruthlessly, so painfully."

"And the only way you could stop Stryder was to kill him," I prompted.

"That's right."

"Hold it a minute!" Murphy objected. "Are you trying to tell me Stryder engineered that auto accident? That's ridiculous! I examined the wreck myself."

"And I examined the body," Clough reminded him. "True, Vincent was driving when it happened. He died of a chemical fire in his stomach. I found traces of potassium metal, which bursts into flames on contact with water. Apparently he'd swallowed a pill, a coated capsule containing pure potassium metal.

"You can't get it in drugstores, but any chemical supply house sells it. Getting it into a capsule would be no great trick, given time to experiment. And I imagine someone as persuasive as Stryder would have no trouble talking another man into swallowing it to

help keep him awake on the drive home."

"I remember," I said. "Stryder was the last one to see Vincent alive that night."

Clough gnawed his lip and unwrapped another antacid tablet. "When the capsule dissolved," he continued, "the chemical acted like a small hand grenade. It had apparently been timed to react shortly after Vincent reached the freeway, on his way home from a late conference with the Mayor."

I nodded. "And you couldn't report the burns in his stomach because Stryder would have exposed what he had on you."

"That's right. But on the other hand, I couldn't let him do a thing like that to anyone else, either. I spent two months trying to figure out a way to kill him. I knew I could cover it up. Finally, when the opportunity presented itself Thursday night it was just too good to pass up."

"How did you manage it?" Murphy inquired.

"Stealing the hatpin was the ticklish part, but once that was accomplished all I had to do was move around behind the Mayor and wait for a bomb burst to show me his exact position. He was looking up, watching the sky like everyone else. I hit him once along the side of the neck.

"The rest was rather easy, with him unconscious. I inserted the hatpin in his left ear and stirred vigorously. But what I can't understand is how you happened to find the hatpin. I thought I'd hidden it quite well."

"We haven't found it yet," Murphy said.

Briefly, I related the episode with the blanket.

"I see," Clough said. "I assume I'm under arrest. Is that correct?"

Murphy assured him that it was.

Mrs. Stryder spoke up then. "Why did you have to poke and pry?" she asked me. "Why couldn't you leave well enough alone?"

I didn't answer, so she turned to Clough. "I'm grateful to you, Robert. I wish I knew how I could repay you."

"You might destroy the papers he had—those pertaining to me," he suggested.

June smiled. "I already did that. In fact, I burned all of his papers last night."

Relief showed on the faces of three anxious politicians.

"Phil was pretty good at framing people," she added. "But he had a wicked sense of humor, too. Imagine, appointing Mr. Norris to investigate vice and immorality! Those photographs of him were beauties."

She paused, her eyes twinkling. "I've never liked him very much. Would you gentlemen do me the favor of not telling him I destroyed the pictures?"

We agreed readily.

Meanwhile, the funeral had

been in progress. Now Murphy slipped the Coroner out a side exit and drove him downtown for booking. Cathy accompanied Mrs. Stryder to the cemetery. I used the pastor's phone to call the story in to the *Bulletin*.

After relating Cathy's discovery of the hatpin I gave John Corcoran Murphy full credit for a brilliant piece of detective work. This is known in the newspaper business as the fine art of cultivating one's sources.

Then I left the empty church and drove to the cemetery, where the Reverend Hamilton was finishing up the services. Murphy's pathologist claimed the body without incident and I joined Cathy and Mrs. Stryder, who were standing apart, chatting with Thelma White.

"Mr. Shaffer!" the widow exclaimed warmly. "Cathy just told Thelma and me of our insurance benefits. We've decided to pool our resources and get the best lawyer we can find to defend poor Mr. Clough."

I grinned at her. "You have a rather wicked sense of humor yourself, Mrs. Stryder."

Afterwards, I drove Cathy to my apartment. I was developing an unreasonable passion for Beef Stroganoff.

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**To a kid detective, third grade . . . . murder can be an acid test.**

# the dull snap

## by ED LACY

THINGS BROKE pretty good for me when I was made Detective, 3rd Grade. I mean, being the youngest and newest member of the Detective Squad I expected to be handed the routine jobs: checking pawn shops for stolen goods, voter registrations, looking for stolen cars—all that dull stuff.

I'm not the hero type but I like a little action to make a job interesting. Perhaps because I was a loner, and didn't have a partner yet, on Monday, my first day on the squad, Lieutenant Wintino told me, "You're to work with Sam Rogers of Homicide. We had a hit-and-run killing yesterday and Homicide has a hunch it may turn out to be a Murder One thing."

Naturally I was so excited I almost went into orbit: Sam Rogers was a famous top cop. He turned out to be a small, dapper man with a sharp face under a gray crewcut. He told me, "Sonny, we may be in on something big. This alleged hit-and-run victim ran a little neighborhood candy store, paid tax on a little over six thousand a year. But his wife has a mink, two big cars and last year they bought a fifty grand house in the country."

"Then he was in the rackets," I said brightly.

Sam Rogers nodded. "We're pretty sure his store was a front for a numbers drop—perhaps other things. Here's two pictures. The skinny-faced guy is the dead storekeeper. You got any idea who the fat guy with the bald noggin is?"

I studied the mug shot: a plump puss with a kind of blank expression except for the sharp eyes. "He looks like Lucky James Bucci, but he was deported to Europe years ago and—"

"And may have sneaked back into the country," Rogers cut in. "In the last two weeks there's been a rash of beatings and one other murder, that we know of, which have Lucky's brand on them. It's possible he's back and trying to take over the numbers syndicate. Now here's a list of bars and night spots. I want you to flash these two pictures quietly, and try to learn if either Lucky or the deceased was seen around lately."

I nearly flipped. On my first day as a detective I was on the trail of one of the biggest hoods in crime history! I pulled Lucky's yellow sheet, studied his long record of arrests, and few convictions, his deportation in 1960 after that Senate crime hearing. I even went to the library and read the magazine articles about ". . . poor Lucky James Bucci, the man without a country, restlessly roaming Europe, a pathetic shadow of the once mighty crime king . . ."

Tuesday and Wednesday I put in eighteen hours a day casually strolling into bars, talking to the bartenders about sports, then showing them my pictures, saying I was looking for old pals. Even a TV private eye couldn't have put on a better act. True, I didn't stumble on anything but Sam Rogers assured me, "You're doing a fine job, sonny, eliminating possible leads. Keep it up."

So on Thursday I was dumbfounded when Lieutenant Wintino called me into his office, said,

"Look into this. A Mrs. Vincenti has been bugging us about the disappearance of her brother, Ronald Duggan, an elevator operator."

"But sir, I'm on the hit-and-run killing?"

"Downtown is taking that over. Talk to Mrs. Vincenti. It seems brother Ronald took his first vacation in life, a cruise to Bermuda, returned to the States and hasn't been seen since."

"Sir, isn't this a case for Missing Persons?

"They've tossed it back in our laps," Lieutenant Wintino said. "Ronald is forty-nine years old and there's no suspicion of foul play. I gather he was a sort of hermit who worked, read a lot in his room. His hobby was studying ancient history. He never smoked, drank, gambled or knew about girls. Suddenly he lives it up, takes this cruise. He returned on a Saturday morning, phoned Mrs. Vincenti on her job and she hasn't heard from him since. Nor has he been back to his job or room. My hunch is the old boy met a chick aboard ship, is off on a party with her. But you talk to Mrs. Vincenti. Maybe she'll stop bothering me."

"Yes sir." I tried to keep the disappointment out of my voice.

Mrs. Vincenti was a stout woman in her early forties who worked in a bakery store on the edge of our squad district. It wasn't hard to make her talk; the trick was to make her stop.

"Let me tell you about Ronald," she said. "He was married when he was nineteen, while working his way through college. A very sweet girl, who died in childbirth. The baby died too. My brother almost went crazy with grief. A man with a fine mind like his, he quit college and took a job running this elevator in a office building. Ever since he's lived like a monk. He had this little room with a cot and his books, a two-burner stove. Every day, when he finished work, he'd rush to his room, fix supper and read. Never even had a radio or TV. Why, I had a hard time getting Ronald to visit us for Sunday dinner. All he wanted was to be with his books. He—"

"Mrs. Vincenti, is Ronald all there?"

"How dare you even suggest that! Ronald is a brilliant man. He knows more about history than any college professor. Some day Ronald was going to write *the* history book. Ronald was always broke, spent every penny he could spare on books. His food was the cheapest, his clothing baggy. So you can imagine my astonishment when he phoned some weeks ago—he always called me twice a week—and said he was taking a vacation, a week's cruise to Bermuda.

"Ronald said he thought it might be good to get away from his books —after more than twenty-five years! Well, I was happy he was at last moving out of his shell. My

husband and I saw him off on the M/S *Princess,* a lovely ship. Ronald sent us a card from Bermuda saying he was having a fine time. The boat was due back Saturday, two weeks ago. We're open Saturdays and shut Tuesdays and while I was out to lunch, Ronald phoned to say he was back and well rested, would see me soon.

"I thought it odd, his calling at noon, because he knows when I go to lunch. I waited for him to come by the house Sunday, tell us all about his cruise. He didn't. Monday night I sent my husband to Ronald's room. He'd sent his landlady a card from Bermuda, but he hadn't returned to his room. Now that isn't like Ronald to leave his books and—"

"What about his job?" I cut in, bored.

"I went to the office building Tuesday. They had received cards from Bermuda, too, but he hadn't been back to work. I even went up to see this Bill Parks, who works in an office in the building and had shared a cabin with Ronald on the ship. He couldn't understand why my brother hadn't returned to work. It seems Ronald had borrowed eighty dollars from Mr. Parks, to pay for the cruise, and hadn't paid him back. That's not like my brother, either. I'm worried. Something terrible must have befallen Ronald!"

"We've checked the hospitals and the morgue," I said. "Could Ronald have meet a woman on the ship, and gone off with her?"

"I wish to God I could believe that. I've been after Ronald for years and years to marry again. But he's shy and books are his romance. As for going off with a woman, he's broke. And he isn't a teenager. If he's having an affair, a romance, why wouldn't he have let me know? At least phoned or written?"

I took down all the usual data. Mrs. Vincenti had a snapshot of Ronald which she gave me. He was an average-looking guy with thick black hair and a moon face. She said, "This was taken about ten years ago and his hair is on the gray side now. But that's how he looks."

By noon I'd examined his room. It was like a thousand other rooms, except for one wall filled from floor to ceiling with history books. His landlady said Ronald never had company, never made a sound and the only time he went out was to go to work. To quote her, "He was like a mouse."

At 2 P.M. I was talking to the other elevator men in the large office building where Ronald worked. I learned he was the oldest elevator pilot, and had refused a promotion to starter. He didn't crack a joke or join the baseball pools, and spent his lunch hour reading in the basement.

Mr. Bill Parks worked for the All Star Novelty Co.—a big outfit,

judging by the snappy reception room. Parks surprised me; I was expecting an older man. He was about twenty-nine, sharply dressed and well put together.

"I only got to know Ronald by riding his elevator," he said. "We said hello or talked about the weather—that sort of thing. I had a week's vacation coming up and saw this ad for a seven day cruise on the *Princess*. When I happened to mention it to Ronald, he suddenly became interested, and said he'd never been anyplace. You know. I guess I felt sorry for the old boy and since I'd have to share a cabin with somebody, I jokingly asked why he didn't come along. He said he had a six months' vacation due him and—"

"A six months' vacation?"

"I suppose he meant accumulated time; he was here when they first opened the building. The point was, Ronald could take time off whenever he wanted to. The cruise cost one hundred and eighty dollars and when he said he was eighty bucks short, I lent him the money. He was going to pay me back ten dollars a week. I'm only a junior executive here, and I need that eighty dollars. Where is he?"

"Did Ronald have a good time aboard ship?"

"Well, he isn't exactly a live one—if you know what I mean. He kept to himself, slept on his deck chair a lot. But he often said the voyage was the greatest thing that ever happened to him. Me, I had a ball." Parks gave me a corny wink.

"Did Ronald meet any women on the ship?"

Parks touched his well-brushed hair. "Not that I know about. I was busy swimming, dancing, holding up the bar. Yeah, I guess he spoke to a few of the older girls. But mostly he was sleeping on his deck chair."

At the steamship offices I was told by an official of the line that the *Princess* would dock on Saturday, and leave the same day for Bermuda. "During the season she docks, is refueled and restocked, practically turns around and sails again," he said. "But you'll have a few hours on Saturday to question Mr. Duggan's cabin steward, if you

wish. According to our records he shared cabin Five Twenty, Deck with one other passenger."

"Have you the number of his passport?"

"A passport isn't needed for Bermuda. On returning you merely show Immigration some identity like a credit card, or driver's license."

As there wasn't anything more I could do about Ronald until the M/S *Princess* docked on Saturday, Lieutenant Wintino had me checking hock shops all Friday. On Saturday morning I was at the dock, watching the passengers embarking, each carrying their five bottles of duty-free booze, passing quickly through customs. The ship was a beauty and some day I may take a cruise myself.

My shield got me into the purser's office and he called in a tired looking steward. When I asked if he recalled Ronald Duggan, the steward said, "So many people come and go each week, by the end of a month they're all a blur. Cabin Five Twenty, three cruises ago?"

"That's right," I said. "A quiet guy, plump. He shared the cabin with a young fellow. Ronald slept a lot and—"

The steward's thin face brightened. "I do recall him. He gave me a twenty-buck tip. I even remember the young fellow seemed annoyed, told him he was overtipping."

"Twenty dollars is a large tip, then?"

"I'll say. If you only knew the tight people we get. They spend all their money and by the end of the voyage all I get is a thank you. I remember him because of the big tip."

I pulled my pictures from my inside pocket. "I'll show you a few photos. If you look through them maybe you can identify him."

"That's him," the cabin steward said, pointing to a half-covered mug shot of Lucky James in my hand.

"This one?" I held up Lucky's photo, my hand shaking.

"Well—no. I'm not so sure now. The man had thick gray hair. But it looked like him when the top of his face was covered by the other pictures."

When I showed him Ronald's picture he said, "That's him, I guess. But he had hard eyes like in the first photo. His chin was fleshy, but I had the feeling his jaw had once been tough and lean. I'm all mixed-up."

"Thanks! You've been a great help," I said, reaching for my hat.

"No call to be sarcastic, officer, I'm only trying to—"

"Believe me, I'm not being sarcastic!" I said, rushing off the ship.

It took time for Detective Sam Rogers to call me back and while I was waiting, I phoned Lieutenant Wintino. I didn't want him to think I was going over his head. When

Sam called back that All Star Novelty was a pin ball outfit, I said I'd be right down to Homicide and to phone Lieutenant Wintino.

Once in headquarters it was only a matter of minutes to phone the Bermuda police, and hear about the acid-destroyed body they'd recently found in a shallow grave. Sam Rogers took over then, had a tail put on Bill Parks. By Monday we had him and Lucky James Bucci collared for the murder of Ronald Duggan and the storekeeper.

After the cabin steward had picked out Lucky's picture it didn't take a Detective, 3rd Grade, to get things in focus. Smart Bill Parks had noticed the resemblance between the elevator operator and Lucky, who was trying to return to the States and take over. Parks did a little snooping, found Ronald lived alone, and was the perfect victim. He then talked Ronald into the cruise, offering to pay his fare if Ronald would keep quiet about Bill not wanting to share a cabin with a stranger.

Lucky James had smuggled himself into Bermuda, from one of the other Caribbean islands. He and Parks killed Ronald while he was sight-seeing. Wearing a wig and Ronald's shabby suit, Lucky sailed with the *Princess* as Ronald Duggan. He used Ronald's library and union cards to breeze through Immigration. Parks, who knew of Mrs. Vincenti's hours through talking to Ronald, or tailing him, had phoned during her lunch hour, passing himself off as Ronald, over the phone, to the bakery boss.

Now, as a Detective, 2*nd Grade*, I'm assigned to another detective squad. Being a newcomer I'll probably be handed the routine cases. But who's complaining?

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# MURDER ANYONE?

*The control of a sizeable estate can impose a burden . . . And Lulu had an odd notion that murder could be merciful.*

**by Robert Levitt**

LULU BENEDICTUS sat quite still as she talked. Her voice, following a cacophonous belch, retained its power. "Yep," she roared. "It was like an explosion when them two cars hit head-on." She intended to put across her story with the subtlety of a triple martini on an empty stomach. The thought amused her.

Zelda Benedictus' stomach was never empty. It made a fat couch for her fat bosom, all of which hung over her fat legs, reminding Lulu how much like a bloated and mottled garden toad her twin sister looked. Zelda's enormous fingers grasped the coffee cup so that it appeared to be nestling in sponge rubber.

Old lady nature sure pulled a fast one on us, she thought, sensing Zelda's uneasiness. We could have been triplets if she'd been split down the middle. She glanced over to see Zelda staring through mountainous peep holes at the dancing flames in the fireplace.

Lulu suddenly threw her empty martini glass into the bricks. "The shatter of glass fairly made my spine crawl," she went on. "The shriek of ripping metal reminded me of a woman's terrifying scream." Lulu knew her sense of the dramatic was paying off when Zelda suddenly started forward in her chair.

"That wasn't the worst of it. Flames," Lulu nodded toward the

fire, "ran through that car like water down a gutter."

Lulu looked at Zelda and decided to add a final touch. "I tell you, Zel, your heart would have burst at hearing them poor souls screaming as they burned!"

She listened to Zelda noisily slurp her coffee; heard her labored breathing. She didn't have to look up to know the story was taking effect. Her twin had a vivid imagination which, when added to the fat crowding her heart, made an undetectable murder weapon.

A soft cry burst from Zelda's lips, "Pills, please—on the table—hurry!"

Lulu ran to the dining table and brought a pill and a glass of water. She stood watching as Zelda leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. Lulu smiled as she thought of how much the excess flesh around her sister's eyes looked like two misplaced pigmy breasts.

"I should have kept my big mouth shut, Zel. I'm sorry," Lulu said as she took the empty glass. "I wasn't thinking about your poor heart. Can I—"

"I am all right now." Zelda emitted a deep sigh. "But I do wish you wouldn't tell me such things. You know how frightened I am of automobiles. Why I never—"

"I know, Zel. Maybe it would be better if we didn't make the trip now. We could go some other time, when you're feeling better."

"Lulu, we have gone to the shrine on our birthday for the past twenty years," Zelda protested. "I am fine, and we will go." She struggled out of her chair and waddled across the room. "I do wish you had come earlier, though. I hate riding at night."

It was working out exactly the way Lulu had planned it. She knew that nothing had kept Zelda from the shrine since they were ten years old. It hadn't done her any good, for Lulu, not Zelda, controlled their parent's sizeable estate. The will had given her full administrative control, provided she remained single and took care of her sister until she married. That was a laugh. If Lulu married first, control went to Zelda.

With Zelda out of the way, she could get married and keep the entire estate. They were both thirty and not getting any younger and she was determined to grab Pete before he changed his mind.

"If you're set on going, Zel, we'd better get started," Lulu said, gathering up her coat and purse. "I'll get the car, and meet you at the alley entrance. You won't have to walk so far that way."

Lulu ran down the back stairs, and between the narrow alley buildings to the apartment garages. She paused to make sure the alley was empty. It was, except for a plate glass hauler that projected a little way into the street, leaving just enough room for a car to squeeze past.

Damn idiot man, she thought, someone should do him a favor and smash into that truck head on. Carting away a pile of junk would teach him a lesson. The truck was so far down the alley she was sure it would not interfere with her plans.

It damned well better not!

She planned to park the car near the end of the alley away from the garages, so that when Zelda stepped out the door she would automatically look for it close to where she was standing. Then, at full speed, Lulu would drive at her sister, suddenly turning on the headlights to add to the horrifying confusion. That, and fear would do the rest.

She pictured Zelda trying to run down the alley, her heart pounding with exertion and fright. At the right moment Lulu would brake the car.

Two such strains in one night would be too much for Zelda.

The prospect of freeing herself from the burden of Zelda's care and of being able to marry Pete at last made Lulu's heart beat unusually fast. To ease her conscience, she told herself she was being kind to her sister.

Zelda could never be happy, a blob of flesh that could never interest any man. There could never be any excitement in Zelda's poor imprisoned life.

"Yep," she assured herself out loud, drumming nervous fingers on the steering wheel, "it's the only way to die!"

Lulu's fingers gripped the wheel when she saw Zelda struggle through the door. She waited until her sister had waddled a few steps, then stepped hard on the accelerator.

A few seconds more and the burden in her life—in both of their lives—would be ended.

She laughed as Zelda turned around. She switched on the lights and her own heart froze. Coming swiftly toward her were the headlights of another car. Panic made her incapable of releasing the gas pressure and the car was coming closer.

In sudden abandon, Lulu swerved her own car toward the building.

It was too late when she realized the headlights were a reflection in the plate glass down the alley. A scream of crushing metal tore at her ear drums.

An instant of searing pain, then nothing.

Zelda waddled slowly to the wreckage. Poor petite, greedy Lulu. It was Zelda's turn to smile. Her heart ruse had been a good one. It had kept Lulu in sympathy, if not belief, in the shrine. Zelda squeezed a few tears over her heavy lids and took Lulu's limp hand in hers.

"I'm sorry Lulu. I only prayed for you to get married. I didn't want this!"

(Continued from Other Side)

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